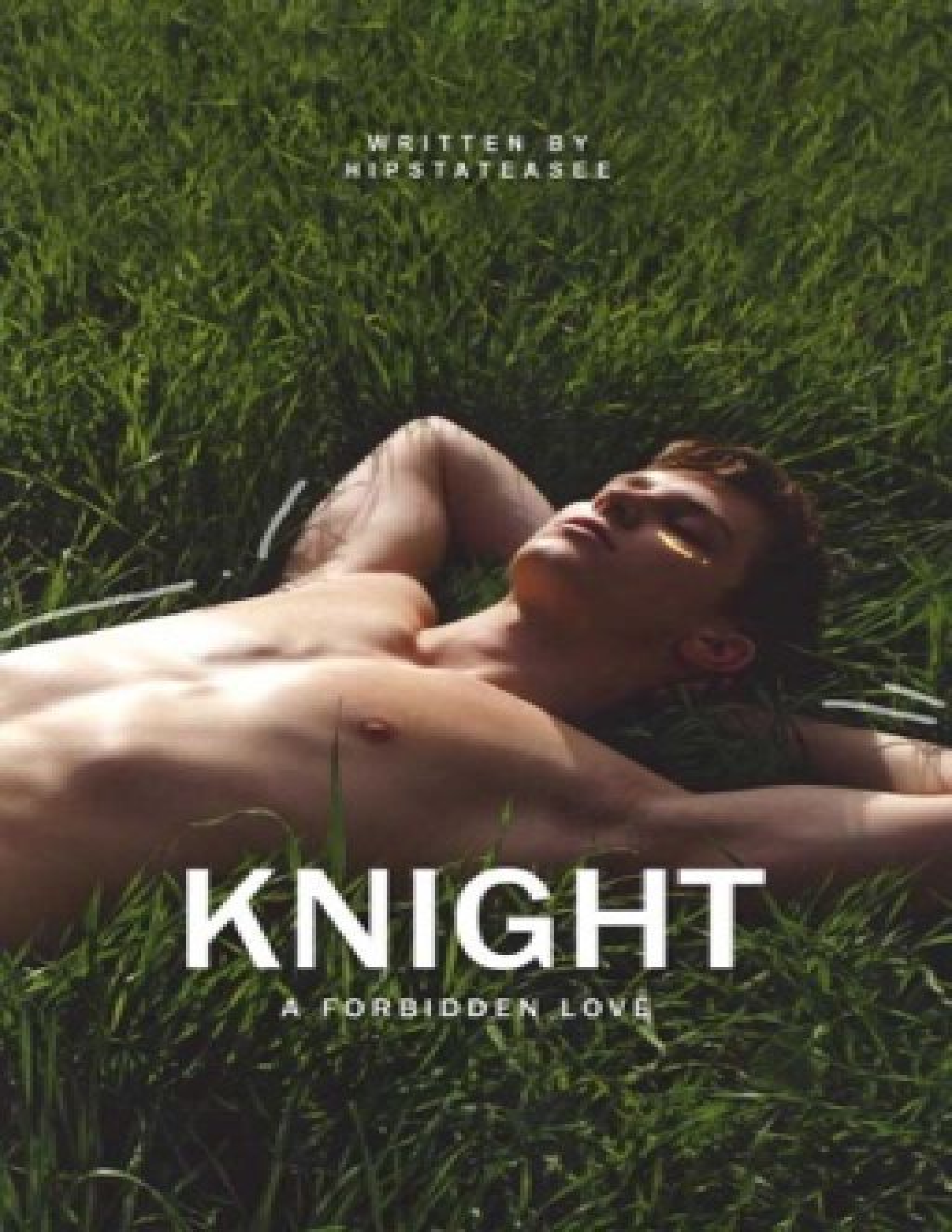
WRITTEN BY
HIPSTATEASEE
KNIGHT
A FORBIDDEN LOVE

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Cast

This is just to give you a general idea of how I picture the characters. They don't necessarily look exactly like their picture, but it's the closest I could find. The main characters have character aesthetics while I just put a photo for the others.

Please feel free to picture them how you want!

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Christo

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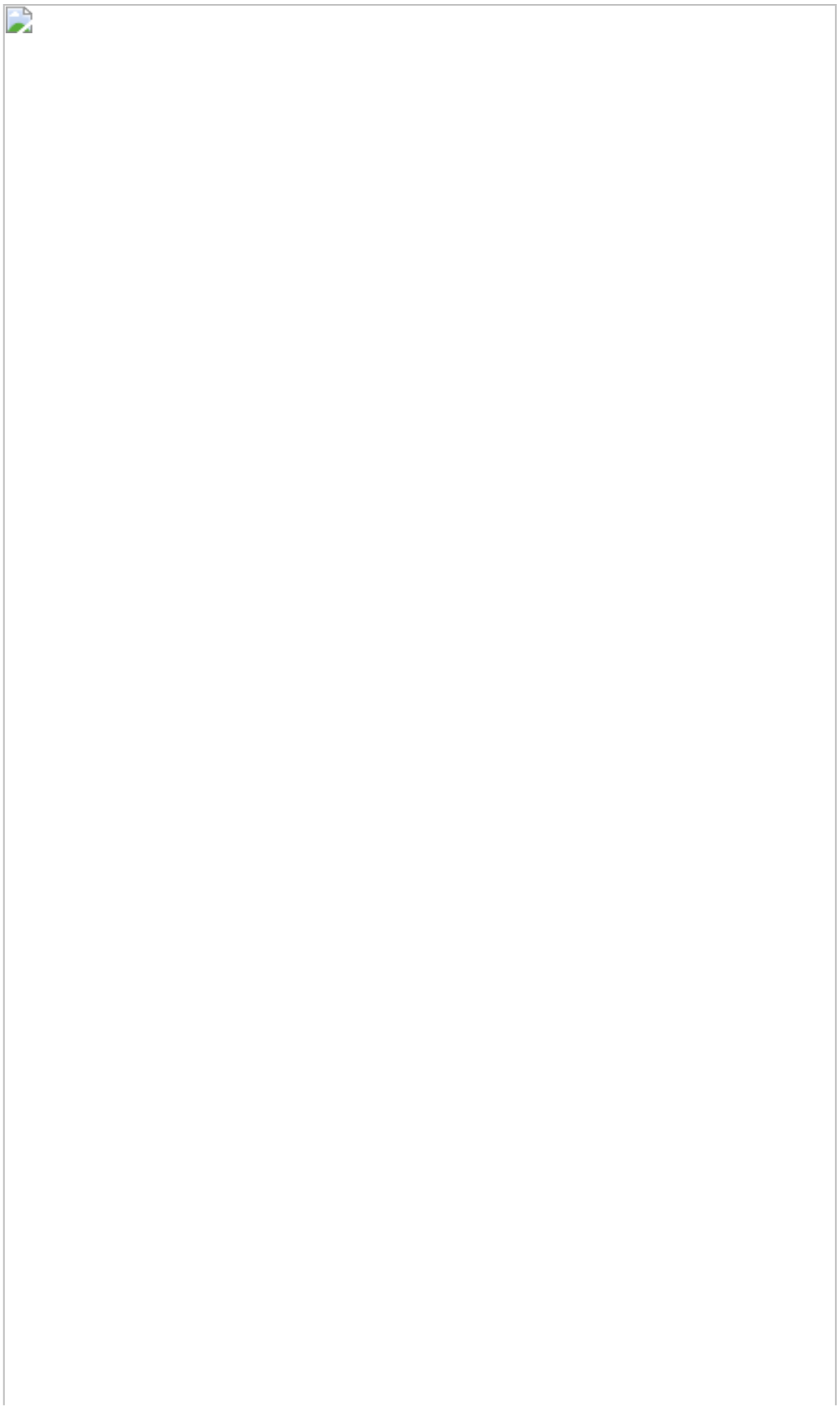
Tony



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Sandy

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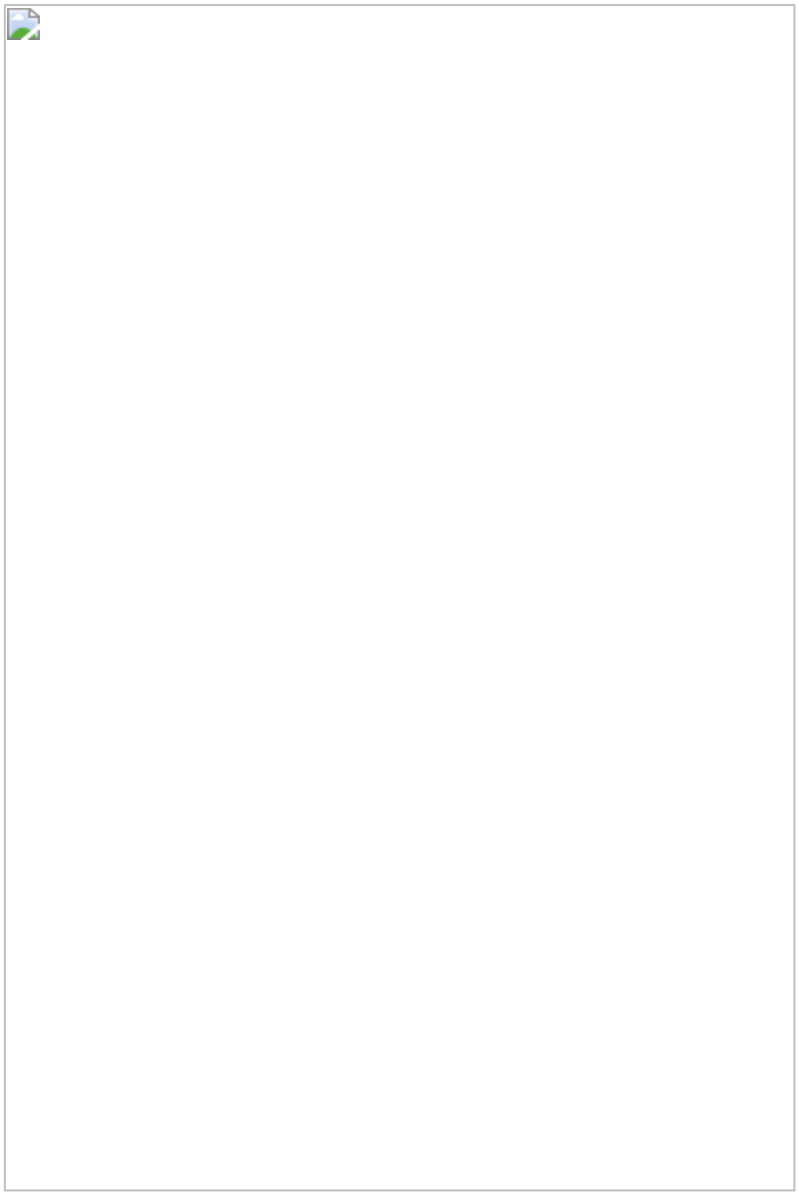
Jake



VERY SIMPLE GUIDE TO AMERICAN FOOTBALL

As the title suggests, this is going to be an oversimplified cheat sheet to help you understand the football scenes in this book. I'm only going to explain the extent of football that will be helpful for this book. It's not going to be in great detail. Like I said, it's going to be simple. Obviously, there's a lot more to football than what will be explained here.

Note: this is *not* rugby. Rugby and football are different sports

FIELD:

The field is 100 yards. There are end zones at each end with goal posts.

100 yards = 91.44 meters

DOWNS:

The team on offense gets 4 downs (4 tries to gain ten yards). If the team gains ten yards before their 4th try, the downs start over at 1. If the offense does not get ten yards after their 4th try, the other team gets possession of the ball.

POINTS: How to get them and how many you get

Touchdown: 6 points. Get the ball into the end zone

Extra-point: 1 point. Kicker kicks the ball through the goal post after a touch down. (This is different from a field goal).

Field goal: 3 points. Kicker kicks the ball through the goal post. This happens within field goal range (field goal range differs between different leagues). It usually happens when the team on offense is on 3rd or 4th down

and think it would be better for them to get the 3 points rather than try to get a first down.

Safety: 2 points. The person with the ball is tackled or forced out of bounds in their own end-zone, OR the ball is dead in the end-zone, OR the offensive team gets a penalty in their own end-zone.

Two Point Conversion: 2 points. Instead of kicking the extra point, the team who just scored the touchdown tries to run a play to get passed the goal line again (from the 3 yard line in high school football) for two points instead of one.

POSITIONS: (only the positions relevant for the story, not all positions are listed) Quarterback: The guy who calls the plays and catches the snap from the center then either throws the ball, hands it off, or runs with it.

Receiver: Catches the ball from the quarterback (hopefully)

Center: The guy that snaps the ball to the quarterback from between his legs.

Running Back: Probably runs fast. He lines up near the quarterback. He can block and also catch passes or hand offs from the quarterback.

Linebacker: Play on defense. Back the defensive line. Usually big guys. Block running backs. Rush the passer (go toward the quarterback and make him throw). Tackle whoever has the ball.

Other football lingo:

Drive: The series of plays of the offense until they lose possession of the ball Incomplete: Whoever was supposed to catch the ball, didn't. Or, it was caught out of bounds.

Line of scrimmage: Nobody can cross this line until the football is in play.

Sack: The quarterback gets tackled behind the line of scrimmage and loses yards.

01

Mason Maloney

Sometimes I felt like I was living in the shadow of my brother. We looked the same except for my scrawnier build versus his athletic one. But still, it was him that got all of the attention whether it be from girls who wanted to be with him or guys that wanted to be him. Being the star quarterback, he was the pride and joy of our town.

Me? Well, I wasn't the star of anything, except maybe at the bakery I worked at. There were very few employees there and because of that we were all considerably close. The bakery was a place where I felt like I belonged. It was only a bonus that I got paid to be there.

After school, I sat in the passenger's seat of mine and Nathan's shared car, waiting for him to drive me to work. I let out a heavy sigh as I looked through the parking lot, hoping to find Nathan among the crowd. Eventually, I saw him running toward the car, pushing through people standing in his way. He threw himself into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut when he reached the car. Nathan wasted no time starting the car and peeling out of the parking spot, getting beeped at as he cut people off.

"Can you try not to get us killed?" I asked worriedly, gripping onto the handle above my head.

"I only have fifteen minutes to get back for practice," he explained hurriedly, rolling through a stop sign.

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head in annoyance.

Nathan barely stopped the car in the bakery parking lot before I rushed out, throwing my backpack over my shoulder. The tires screeched on the pavement as he speedily left back toward school.

I ripped open the bakery door and hastily walked toward the back room to throw on my apron.

"Hey, Mase," Charlene, the owner, greeted with a wide grin as I walked to the front.

I smiled sweetly. "Afternoon, Charlene."

"Before I forget, I wanted to let you know that we have a new hire starting tomorrow and I'll probably have him training with you," she told me as she took a pan of muffins out of the oven.

"Really?" I asked, feeling surprised.

I had never trained anyone before, not that we usually had new people working here. I hadn't been here the longest, nor was I the most experienced.

"You two are around the same age, so you'll probably have most of your shifts together," she explained, placing the muffins in the freezer to let them cool.

It was hard to stop myself from groaning at that. I hoped that it wasn't anyone from my own school.

"Got anything for me to do?" I decided to ask instead of commenting on what she had told me.

She stood silently for a moment as if she was trying to think. Then, Charlene looked at me and snapped her fingers.

"I need you to take the muffins out of the freezer in two minutes and then I have a cake for you to decorate," she let me know, walking toward the front counter.

Charlene grabbed a paper out of the binder of orders and brought it back to me. I read through the paper to see how the cake needed to be decorated and then set it down on the counter I was leaning on.

"I'm going to head out," Charlene started. "Sandy should be here soon."

As if on cue, the bell on the front door rang and Sandy came barging into the kitchen a moment later, looking disheveled. Sandy always acted as if she was running late, even when she wasn't.

"Sorry I'm late!" Sandy exclaimed, throwing her apron on hastily.

Charlene and I shared knowing looks, chuckling slightly. Sandy quickly made her way to the front counter to man the register. Charlene waved goodbye and she was soon out the door. I took the muffins out of the freezer and brought them to the front to put them on display.

"Did you hear about the new hire?" I asked Sandy as I placed the muffins in the glass case.

Sandy nodded. "Charlene told me about him yesterday."

"Do you know who it is?"

She shrugged. "I didn't ask."

I sighed, closing the glass case and turning to look at Sandy.

"I'm going to go decorate a cake, call me if you need me," I told her, heading back to the kitchen before waiting for a response.

When I got back to the kitchen, I picked up the order sheet. I had to have the cake done by five o'clock when the customer would be picking it up. Charlene had already made the cake and it was sitting in the cooler, lathered in buttercream frosting.

I took the cake out of the freezer and brought it to the decorating table. I smoothed out the frosting that was already on it before grabbing the piping and colors I would need to decorate the floral pattern that was requested. When I first started working here, it took me forever to get the hang of decorating the cakes, but now it was like second nature.

I slowly and carefully piped pink and purple flowers on the circular cake. It was important for me to take my time so that I could perfect each flower. Once I was finished, I placed the box it would leave in.

"Mason!" Sandy called out.

"Yeah?"

"The woman is here for her cake!"

I smiled down at my creation before closing the box and bringing it out to the front counter along with the order sheet.

***

Even though the bakery closed at seven PM, Sandy and I don't get to leave until eight as long as we get everything done that needs to be. We need to clean up the entire shop, count the drawer, check inventory, and get rid of everything that didn't sell.

"I finished my stuff, Sandy," I told her, looking out to the parking lot to see Nathan sitting out there in our car.

"You can go," she said, looking at the computer. "I just have to finish my drawer."

I bid Sandy goodbye before heading out the door with my backpack and a bag of sweets. I waved to Nathan before slipping into the passenger's seat of our car.

"Finally," Nathan said with a groan, backing out of the spot that he was parked crookedly in.

"I'm out early," I pointed out, gesturing toward the clock.

"Doesn't feel like it," he muttered, driving toward our home. "Did you bring food?"

I rolled my eyes playfully, shaking the bag of sweets and opening it so he could grab something out of it. He shoved the first thing he grabbed into his mouth and moaned happily at the taste.

"I love you," Nathan mumbled with his mouth full of chocolate chip muffin.

"You better."

Once we were home, I placed the bag of sweets on the kitchen counter then poured myself a glass of almond milk.

"There's dinner for you in the fridge," Nathan told me as he walked into the kitchen, picking up another sweet out of the bag on the counter.

"That's a lot of processed sugar for you today," I pointed out, grabbing my dinner plate from the fridge.

"Let me live," he retorted with his mouth full in a dramatic tone, walking out of the kitchen.

After heating up my dinner in the microwave, I sat at the kitchen table alone to eat my food. By the time I was finished, I headed upstairs to do my homework and head to bed.

***

A loud, frustrated groan woke me up the next morning. The groan sounded like it was coming from across the hall in Nathan's room. I sighed, rolling my eyes at his dramatics. I let out a yawn before hopping out of bed and leaving my room at the same time as Nathan.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked as I followed him down the stairs. The two of us headed into the kitchen where our mother and father were sitting at the table with coffees.

Nathan looked down at his phone before letting out another groan, throwing his head back.

"What's got your panties in a twist?" Dad asked, setting his mug down. Our mom smacked him on the shoulder.

Nathan and I sat down across from our parents.

"I just found out that one of our cheerleaders was screwing around with Sam Knight," Nathan revealed with a pout.

I rolled my eyes at his admittance. Nathan and the rest of his team had this unnecessary rivalry with the team from the town over, meaning Nathan automatically hated their quarterback, also known as Sam Knight. The funny thing about Sam was that his school mascot was also a Knight while ours was a Warrior.

"I don't understand your hatred for that boy," Mom said, shaking her head.

" *Mom* ," Nathan started exaggeratedly, "he's a Knight. I'm obligated to hate him."

"Have you ever even spoken to him?" I asked curiously.

Nathan rolled his eyes. "Of course I have. He's an ass."

"Nathan, language," Mom scolded. He let out a small 'sorry' before getting up to get some breakfast.

I toasted a bagel that I had brought home yesterday from the bakery and lathered it in cream cheese, then I filled my travel mug with coffee and leaned on the counter to wait for my twin. We bid goodbye to our parents before making our way out to the car.

"Can I drive?" I asked seriously. Nathan was still munching on some breakfast and he was enough of a bad driver without anything distracting him.

"You're funny," he replied, slipping into the driver's seat.

I rolled my eyes, sliding into the passenger's seat. "I was serious."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, waving me off and flooring it out of the driveway.

I just shook my head and gripped the door in response to his reckless driving. I was honestly surprised he hadn't gotten in an accident yet.

We arrived at school surprisingly in one piece. Nathan whipped into a parking spot crookedly and immediately got out of the car and headed off toward his friends. I let out a sigh and got out of the car, remembering to lock it like Nathan hadn't.

A few people greeted me as I made my way toward the school. Once I was inside, I instantly went to my locker to grab what I needed for the first few periods of the day.

"Hey, stranger," my friend Bella greeted me as she stood behind me with our other friend Ross.

"Hey," I answered, turning to look at the two of them. "Where's Pete?" I asked, wondering where the last of our friend group could be.

"Running late, like always," Ross told me with an annoyed sigh.

"Shut your mouth," Pete snapped, surprising us with his presence.

"You were supposed to pick me up this morning you ass," Ross shot at him with an angry glare.

Pete's brown eyes widened. "I forgot."

Ross rolled his eyes. "No shit."

"You know you have to remind me about these things!" Pete exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air.

"I shouldn't have to you-" Ross started.

"Enough," Bella cut him off. "We have more important things to discuss, like movie night at my house on Friday."

"I have to go to the football game," I reminded her.

Bella rolled her eyes. "I know. After the game."

"We'll see if Pete can remember to show up," Ross said, crossing his arms.

Pete shot him a dirty look, but I interjected before he could start arguing with him again.

"So we will all go to Redbox after school then go get some food and head to the game," I suggested. Bella nodded enthusiastically.

After school, I leaned against the car, waiting for Nathan to drive me to the bakery for work. I sighed when I saw him hurrying through the parking lot like he always did, dodging people and cars the whole way toward me. As soon as he was in the car, we were on our way within a few seconds. When we reached the bakery, Nathan didn't even bother to park the car and decided to just drop me off by the door.

"Hi, Charlene," I greeted my boss once I stepped inside.

"Back here, Mase!" she shouted from the kitchen. I followed the sound of her voice to find her in the kitchen where she was in the middle of piping frosting onto a cake.

"The new hire should be here in a few minutes," Charlene told me. "Just show him the basics and how to use the till for now. We'll worry about him baking later on."

I nodded. "Alright."

"Sandy's off today so it will just be you and him. You shouldn't be too busy," she said as she put the finishing touches on the cake.

"Okay, I'm sure we'll be fine," I agreed.

"You will."

A few moments later the bell at the door rang and Charlene excitedly clapped her hands together. She scurried to the front to go greet who was here.

"Welcome!" I heard her shout. "Mason! Come meet Sam!"

I stepped out of the kitchen to come face to face with none other than Sam Knight.

This should be interesting.

02

Mason Maloney

Sam and I hadn't said anything to each other since Charlene left the two of us alone a few moments ago. I could tell by the look on his face that he was shocked to see me, knowing I was related to Nathan. I cleared my throat awkwardly and motioned for him to come behind the counter. Sam followed my instruction quickly.

"So I'm just going to show you the basics today," I told him, trying to alleviate the tension.

Sam nodded. "Sounds good."

His voice sounded different than I thought it would. It was deep yet calm and had a little bit of a rasp to it and I was sure he used it to charm people.

I motioned for Sam to follow me toward the kitchen and grabbed him an apron and a blank name tag.

"This is really all the uniform is," I said, handing him the apron.

I took a sharpie to write his name on the tag along with a little smiley face next to it. After I finished, I handed Sam the name tag to which he looked at and smirked.

"Cute," he commented with a teasing glint in his eye.

I ignored his comment, not knowing what to say.

"So you're Nathan's brother, right?" Sam asked, leaning against the counter, his long sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

I nodded. "Yeah, we're twins."

"I knew he had a twin brother, I just expected you two to look more alike," he responded thoughtfully.

"We're identical," I told him with a smirk.

Sam let out a chuckle. "Okay, you look alike in the face, but that's it."

"I get it, I'm short and scrawny," I replied, rolling my eyes.

"I wasn't going to say that," Sam told me.

Before I could say anything back, the bell on the door rang so I motioned for Sam to follow me to the front. An elderly lady with a young girl were in the shop, looking through the glass at the sweets.

"Need help with anything ladies?" I asked kindly.

The old woman smiled and turned to the girl, who appeared to be her granddaughter, to ask her what she wanted. The young girl whispered to her grandmother with a grin, showing off her missing tooth.

"We would like two apple fritters please," the woman told me kindly.

I turned to Sam to show him where the apple fritters were located. Everything was labeled on the shelves, so it shouldn't be too hard for him to figure it out.

"You have to take one of these papers to grab the product," I instructed, pulling out a thin piece of paper we used in the bakery and using it to put the two apple fritters in the bag.

I gave the bag to Sam while I walked over to the register to ring up the items

"You can find the exact item in the 'lookup' area on the register," I told Sam who nodded along to my directions. "Or you could just type in the item code if you know it."

I decided to just go through the lookup area to show him how to work it. After ringing up the items, the old woman paid and Sam handed her the bag of sweets.

"You'll learn the codes for things throughout your time here, I don't even know all of them," I said after the ladies left the store.

"How do you figure them out?" Sam asked thoughtfully.

"When you do inventory, the codes will be on the sheet and using them makes everything easier," I explained. "They also show up after you select the item in the lookup area."

Sam just nodded and leaned against the back counter with his arms crossed. He looked down at the floor slightly, his purposely messy dark brown hair falling in front of his eyes. His jawline was sharp and squared and his skin was surprisingly clear. Before now, I didn't think I had ever been this close to Sam. I had probably seen him in passing at some parties and at football games, but never had an interaction with him.

Eventually, Sam looked up and caught me staring at him which caused him to throw a smirk my way.

"Enjoying the view?" he asked teasingly.

"I just... zoned out," I answered softly.

"Okay..." Sam said as if he didn't believe me.

The two of us stood in silence for a few moments. The bakery was usually busier in the morning and again after five, so the between hours were slower during the week. Sam and I would have a lot of time on our hands.

"What made you want to work here?" I couldn't help but ask. What was a high school quarterback doing working at a bakery?

Sam shrugged and looked up at the ceiling. "I needed a job and this place would let me work around my football schedule."

"You didn't have football today?" I asked curiously. Nathan seemed to have football practice everyday after school.

"I had it in the morning," he explained. "We do two-a-days on Tuesdays and Thursdays, afternoon practice on Mondays and Fridays, and morning practice on Wednesdays."

"That's a lot of football," I commented, nearly shuddering.

He shrugged. "It's not bad if you like it and want to win."

"So you won't be here when you have afternoon practice?" I wondered. It seemed like he would only be here on Wednesdays.

"I usually get out of practice by 3:30 in the afternoon so I'll just come after that," Sam answered, looking toward me. "Sometimes four o'clock if we didn't have a morning practice, but I already talked to Charlene about it."

I nodded in understanding. "Do you have a game on Friday?"

Sam chuckled. "I have a game every Friday."

Duh. Stupid me.

"Maybe you should come to mine instead of Nathan's," Sam continued with a devious smirk.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, that would go over *so well* with him," I responded sarcastically.

Sam laughed, throwing his head back slightly and using his hand to push his hair back.

"When do you play us?" I asked him with a slight laugh.

He looked over at me and thought for a moment. "The Thanksgiving game like every year and then playoffs, assuming we both get there."

"Who's going to win?" I teased with a smirk that almost matched his.

Sam looked as if he was trying to bite back a laugh as he looked over at me with a thoughtful expression.

"We'll see."

***

I sat on the sidewalk outside the bakery, waiting for Nathan to pick me up. Sam was a quick learner and after I showed him what to do when closing up, he was able to do it and actually be a big help to me. However, since we did get quite busy closer to closing time, it took us a bit longer to finish everything up so we didn't get out until after eight.

I was out late and Nathan still wasn't here on time to pick me up. I had tried calling him, but I got his voicemail every time. It occurred to me that I should probably see if one of my parents could pick me up, but it would only get Nathan in trouble since it was his responsibility. And since I was a good brother, unlike him, I wanted to keep our parents out of it.

"Hey, Mason. Do you need a ride?" Sam called out from his car, causing my head to shoot up.

I pondered on it for a moment. There was no way Nathan would be okay with me hanging around with Sam Knight. But at this point I didn't care since it was *his* fault I had to consider this at all.

"Isn't it out of your way?" I asked, standing up.

Sam just shrugged. "I don't mind."

Without giving it much more thought, I opened the passenger's door and slid in. The radio was playing so softly that I couldn't make out the song. Sam's car was nice. It wasn't too new or old, but it was obvious he took good care of it.

"Which way am I going?" Sam asked me as he started moving the car.

"Take a right out of the parking lot," I instructed him.

After pulling out of the parking lot, I told him to continue following the street for a while.

"So, your ride forgot about you?" he wondered as he stopped at a red light.

"Nathan isn't the best at remembering things, even though he's supposed to pick me up everyday," I answered in an annoyed tone with my arms crossed on my chest. "Take a left up here," I directed after we went through the traffic light.

"Do you two share the car?"

I scoffed. "More like I put gas in it and Nathan drives it."

Sam raised his eyebrows. "That doesn't seem fair."

"I let him take it because he has to fit all of his football shit in there, but the least I expect of him is that he picks me up and he can't even do that," I complained.

I didn't mean to rant to Sam, but I was just so annoyed at Nathan for forgetting about me. When I'm done at work, I wanted to go home and not sit around outside like an idiot.

"I can always give you a ride," Sam offered kindly.

I let out a sigh. "Thanks, Sam."

Soon enough we pulled into my driveway just in time to see Nathan rushing out of the house. He looked over at the car confusedly before he started making his way over to it. I knew for a fact he was going to freak out if he saw Sam, so I hurriedly got out of the car.

"Thanks for the ride!" I said with a wave, moving toward Nathan and pushing him back by the shoulder.

"Why the hell is Sam Knight here?" he exclaimed angrily.

Sam hadn't backed out of the driveway like I hoped he would. Instead, he looked at Nathan with a smug face and a smirk and his window rolled down.

"I'm just hanging around with my new friend, Mason," Sam called out teasingly.

Nathan shot him a death glare and I swore I saw steam coming out of his ears as he pushed past me and stormed over to Sam who still looked as calm as ever.

"I don't know what you think you're doing hanging around with my brother, but it stops now, Knight," Nathan seethed as he stood in front of Sam.

I shook my head in annoyance and walked over to Nathan, grabbing him by the shirt to pull him away from Sam's car.

"That'll be hard considering we work together, but I'll keep your suggestion in mind," Sam responded sarcastically.

"It wasn't a sugg—" Nathan started, moving closer to the car.

"Okay, bye Sam. Thanks for the ride," I cut him off, pulling him up the driveway with me. Sam seemed to finally get the hint and leave. As soon as Nathan and I were in the house, he exploded.

"What the fuck, Mason!" he screamed, throwing his arms up in the air and making me back up against the front door. "What were you doing with him?"

Maybe it was because I was tired, or because I was annoyed that he had forgotten to pick me up, but I snapped.

"Maybe if you had remembered to pick me up, I wouldn't have needed a ride from him!" I shouted, stepping closer to him.

"I was just about to go get you!" he replied in defense of himself.

"Twenty minutes late!" I reminded him. "I wanted to go home as soon as my shift ended and you weren't there! And not to mention you weren't answering your phone."

"I was busy," Nathan told me, crossing his arms.

"No, Nathan," I started. "You were being selfish. You were doing whatever you wanted to do and forgetting about the one thing I need you to do for me."

He didn't say anything, so I continued.

"All I need you to do is drop me off and pick me up from work with *our* car," I continued. "Do I need to remind you that we share it? That it's mine just as much as it's yours? Or maybe even more mine."

"How is it more yours?" he spat as if he was offended.

"Who puts the gas in it, Nathan?" I questioned him. He just rolled his eyes at me. "Fine, if you're going to be an ass then maybe I'll just stop giving you money for gas."

"Then we both wouldn't have a ride, dumb ass," Nathan answered as if I was stupid.

"No, I would go put gas in it with my money and drive it myself," I told him with a smirk. "You have football friends that could bring you home."

With that, I was done with our conversation. I left him near the front door as I went up to my room, not even bothering to check the fridge for dinner.

***

Nathan came rushing down the stairs the next morning while I was eating breakfast with my parents. Dad shot him a confused look while taking a sip of his coffee. Nathan quickly ate an un-toasted bagel before tossing me the car keys.

"You're driving," he said before leaving the kitchen to go out to the car.

I stared at the keys in my hand for a few moments. It was hard to even remember the last time I had driven Nathan and I. I bid my parents goodbye and followed my brother out to the car where he was sitting in the passenger's seat, messing around with his phone.

"You're actually letting me drive?" I asked him incredulously as I got into the driver's seat.

Nathan shrugged. "You can take it to work today, I'm getting a ride home from Tony."

I was surprised that he had taken what I said last night to heart. Nathan was usually so strong-willed and didn't let anything get to him.

"I didn't really mean what I said last night," I told him as I pulled out of the driveway. "I was just mad."

"But you were right," he admitted with a sigh. "You deserve the car too. We can switch off with it."

I nodded in agreement. I didn't mind putting gas in the car as long as Nathan treated the car like it was both of ours and not just his.

"And I really don't want you getting rides from Sam Knight anymore," Nathan added, looking toward me.

I rolled my eyes as I continued driving. "I have to work with him."

"Why is he working there anyway?" Nathan asked in an annoyed tone.

"Maybe because he needs a job?" I suggested. "Not everyone has a nice brother to pay for car necessities."

Nathan scoffed. "I just don't want him to mess with you. He's an ass."

"He seemed fine to me," I admitted.

"He may seem nice now but if he starts messing with you, then I'm going to have to kick his ass and as much as I would like to kick his ass, I probably

shouldn't," Nathan explained as we pulled into the school parking lot.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes as I parked the car. "He's not going to mess with me considering I could get him fired."

The two of us got out of the car and started walking toward the school together.

"Just don't get too close to him," were Nathan's parting words.

03

Mason Maloney

"What's his name? Is he cute?" Sandy asked excitedly.

Sandy had been questioning me about Sam since I had walked into the bakery. She basically pounced at me when I got behind the counter.

I let out a heavy sigh. "His name is Sam and I don't know."

Sandy rolled her eyes at me. "You should be able to tell if another guy is good looking."

It was no secret that Sam was good looking with his chiseled cheek bones, sharp jawline, and green eyes. However, I never wanted to admit that to Sandy.

"You'll see when he gets here," I muttered, walking back into the kitchen.

I looked around to see if Charlene had left me anything to bake for her. She usually got all the baking done in the morning and throughout the day, but sometimes she would leave something for me to do. I sighed when I realized there was nothing and I was going to have to sit around with Sandy until she left at five. A few moments later, I heard the bell on the door ring and Sandy let out a surprised gasp.

"Sorry, I'm a little late," Sam said when I met him at the counter.

I just shrugged. "It's fine. Charlene hired you knowing you would have to be late sometimes."

"I'm Sandy," Sandy cut in annoyingly, pushing me out of her way so she could offer her hand to Sam.

He smirked and shook her hand. "Sam."

"Nice to meet you, Sam. I look forward to working with you," Sandy responded with a wink.

I scoffed and motioned for Sam to follow me back to the kitchen. He grabbed his apron and put it on, tying it around his waist.

"Hm," Sam hummed.

"What?"

"I can't seem to tie this. Can you do it for me?" he asked teasingly, holding the ties of his apron.

I knew he was just messing around by the look on his face, but I walked behind him and started tying his apron anyway. Being in such close proximity to him, I finally saw that he was a good four inches taller than me and smelled surprising good for someone who had just come from football practice.

"Too tight?" I asked from behind him, my hands still on his apron.

Sam turned his head to face me. He smiled slightly down at me and shook his head.

"Just right," he answered.

The two of us stared into the other's eyes for a few moments. I noticed that his green eyes looked slightly blue in the light and his eyelashes were long enough that they curled upwards.

I cleared my throat and stepped away from him when I noticed I had been staring for too long.

"So... um, we should go help Sandy out front," I muttered awkwardly.

Sam laughed at my discomfort but didn't comment on it.

"Alright," he said, walking ahead of me toward the front of the store.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts before I followed him. A little while later, Sandy's shift ended and I was still feeling awkward around Sam as I swept up around the counter and he recounted the drawer.

"It's even," Sam told me after shutting the register drawer.

I nodded without looking at him. "Good."

"So," he started, leaning against the counter like he always did. "When are you going to teach me how to bake?"

This caused me to look up at him. He seriously wanted to learn how to bake?

I shrugged and went back to sweeping. "Maybe we can start some of the easier stuff next week."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, like basic cookies and cupcakes," I answered, leaning the broom against the wall.

He nodded before changing the subject. "So that Sandy girl talks a lot."

"That's only because you're hot," I blurted before I could stop myself.

My hand immediately shot up to cover my mouth as I started at Sam's smirking face with wide eyes.

"I meant because *she* thinks you're hot," I quickly amended.

"Don't worry, Mase. I know I have an affect on people," he teased.

My embarrassment only grew and I could feel my cheeks burning up and turning pink. I didn't think Sam Knight would be able to affect me, but it was clear that I was wrong. I tried avoiding eye contact with him, but he wouldn't let me get away with that. Sam walked up to me, forcing me to look at him.

"You're cute, Mase," he said with a grin, punching me on the shoulder lightly and effectively confusing me.

Cute?

***

The awkward tension never left as Sam and I closed up the bakery. I let him man the register and he seemed to be a natural at it. The only time I spoke to him was when he had a question. Other than that, I hung out in the kitchen and cleaned up.

Sam and I walked out of the bakery together silently. I had almost forgotten that I had driven myself to work so I was instantly happy that I could go straight home.

"Wow, you have the car tonight?" Sam asked me, pointing toward the unoccupied car.

I looked at him, scratching the back of my neck. "Yeah, I kinda screamed at Nathan and made him feel bad so he let me have the car."

Sam chuckled and shook his head. "Whatever it takes, I guess."

I nodded, feeling the awkwardness from earlier start to disappear. Sam seemed to be the type that didn't get flustered or embarrassed easily. He just went with the flow of things. Hopefully he could rub off on me.

"See you Saturday?" I asked, knowing we had an opening shift together.

"Bright and early," he agreed. "Unless you've accepted my invitation to my game tomorrow."

I rolled my eyes as a smirk took over his face. "Not gonna happen."

"One day," Sam responded, his smirk turning to a friendly grin.

"Maybe," I replied before getting into the driver's seat of my car.

Sam waved to me as he drove away. I just sat and thought for a moment alone. Being around Sam made me feel different. What was he doing to me?

***

"I'm starving," Pete complained from beside me. I couldn't help but agree with him as we waited for Bella and Ross to return to the bleachers with our snacks.

Our afternoon plans didn't work out like we had hoped. We hadn't gone shopping for food nor had we gotten movies from Redbox like we wanted. Instead, we waited around for Pete to finish a test he had to take after school and then spent the rest of the time until the football game playing video games at Ross's house.

Ross and Bella soon returned with bags of popcorn and water bottles. Knowing Pete, this wouldn't be nearly enough to satisfy his hunger.

"We have to get some food after the game," Pete said with his mouth full of popcorn.

"We are doing a movie night!" Bella reminded him sternly.

"We can do that after some Chipotle!" Pete snapped back.

"Chipotle sounds so good right now," Ross agreed with a hungry groan.

Bella huffed and crosses her arms over her chest with a pout. She liked everything to go exactly as she planned it, but it almost never did. Not with a friend like Pete who made us wait around for him all the time or a friend like Ross who got annoyed so easily. Or, a friend like me who was indifferent to most things that Bella planned on.

Soon enough the football game started with our team having the ball first. I knew this must have annoyed Nathan. He liked it better when their team received the ball first in the second half.

"Nathan's throw is looking good," Bella commented happily from beside me.

"It better be, he practices every damn day," I replied, crossing my arms as I watched the game.

I enjoyed watching football, mostly because I enjoyed watching Nathan do something he was good at. It filled me with pride to see my brother excel at something he loved. Our parents tried to attend most games, but they usually sat with some of the other parents they had become friends with over the years.

"His throw has to be good if he plans on beating Sam Knight this year," Ross pointed out. "That kid's a beast."

Bella quickly shushed him. "Don't talk about him here!"

I hadn't bothered to tell any of my friends that I was now working with Sam. The longer I could keep it a secret from everyone at school, the better. Everyone would freak out the way they do when they find out about the cheerleaders getting with him.

"He's not wrong though, Bell," Pete interjected. "Knight completely dominated last season."

I kept out of their conversation, not wanting to talk about Sam. I was glad that most of my conversations with Sam were unrelated to my brother and football. He seemed to know I wouldn't want to talk about that stuff with him and that was probably why the two of us got along well.

My friends startled me when they stood up and started cheering. After the initial shock, I stood up with them and noticed that our team had scored a touchdown. Our special teams went out on the field and quickly kicked the extra point, making the score 7-0.

Bella started yelling loudly and cheering as our defense took the field. I knew she had a thing for one of the defensive players, but she hadn't admitted it yet.

Luckily our defense was able to hold off the other team's offense until halftime. The score at halftime was 14-0.

"Can the game just end now?" Pete asked dramatically. "I want Chipotle."

Bella smacked his shoulder. "Quit complaining, Peter!"

Pete gasped, holding his hand to his chest. "Don't you dare call me that."

"It's just one letter, I don't-" Bella started.

"Stop it," Ross snapped in annoyance.

I shook my head at their behavior, but didn't comment on it. Bella and Pete were always arguing and there wasn't much that we could do about it.

Soon enough the game ended with a score of 21-7. Pete and Bella were both jumping in joy, but obviously for different reasons.

I got in the front seat of Ross's car, leaving Bella and Pete together in the back. It only took a few seconds before the two of them were arguing about something.

"They're so annoying," Ross complained as he started driving toward Chipotle.

"I think they just love to fight with each other," I responded with a sigh.

"You're probably right," Ross agreed with a nod.

Pete and Bella were done fighting by the time we got to Chipotle. Pete nearly hurled himself out of the car as it was still moving and beat us all inside. I couldn't help but laugh at his eagerness. After we all got our food, we found a table near the corner for the four of us. Bella and Pete sat across from Ross and me, facing the front of the store.

"I'm in heaven right now," Pete moaned with a mouth full of burrito.

"Ugh Pete, that's disgusting. Don't talk with your mouth full!" Bella ordered.

He moved closer to her face and started opening his mouth wider as he chewed just to annoy her. She pushed his face away roughly with a scowl. Bella looked over at me and her eyes widened as she let out a gasp.

"What?" I asked, setting my burrito down.

"You'll never guess who just walked in," she said, astonished.

"Who?"

"Sam Knight!" she said in a whisper.

This caused me to whip my head around and see Sam standing in line, laughing with his friends. His smile was so wide that he had crinkles by his eyes. He looked as if he had just showered. His hair was damp and slicked back and he wore a white t-shirt that fit him perfectly along with some gray Nike sweatpants. I knew if Sandy was here she would be talking about how sexy he looked.

"Damn, why does he have to be so attractive?" Bella wondered as if she was in agony. I found myself silently agreeing with her. He looked *good* .

"You didn't even want us talking about him earlier and now you're saying how hot he is," Ross pointed out with an eye roll.

"Because this is neutral territory," Bella told him. "You can't talk about him at our field."

I could tell that Sam and his friends were getting closer to us as their voices began to sound louder. The group of boys sat at the table behind us, causing me to tense up.

"Mase, can you go fill up my drink?" Bella asked with innocent doe eyes, dragging me out of my thoughts.

I took the last sip of my own drink and nodded, taking her cup in my hand. I stood up and turned around to see that Sam and his friends were all staring at me.

"Mase?" Sam asked confusedly.

I awkwardly waved with the cups in my hands. "Hey, Sam."

I could feel my own friends staring at me with wide eyes, but I couldn't turn to look at them. Sam surprised me by standing up with his own empty cup and motioning me to follow him to the soda machine.

"Thought I wasn't going to see you until tomorrow," he told me with a smirk as he filled his cup with lemonade.

"Well, this is the only Chipotle around," I pointed out as I filled my cup with ice.

Sam chuckled. "That's true."

"How was your game?" I asked him, filling my cup with Diet Coke.

"It was good, we won," he answered, taking a sip of his drink.

"That's good, so did Nathan," I told Sam with a smirk as I filled Bella's cup with Root Beer.

Sam shot me a smirk of his own. "That's good. I like when my opponents do well. It makes it feel so much better when I beat them."

"Cocky aren't you?"

Sam shrugged. "I like to call it confidence."

We stood in silence for a few moments. I didn't know why I didn't just walk back to my friends, but I did know I liked being in Sam's company. Sam looked back toward his friends and then back at me, scratching the back of his neck nervously. I didn't think I had ever seen him look nervous.

"Hey, can I get your number?" he asked with a heavy breath. "Just in case either of us need to contact each other for work or something."

He didn't need an explanation. I would have given it to him anyway.

I nodded with a small grin, pulling my phone out of my pocket. "Sure."

Sam smiled back and handed me his phone where I added my contact. Our fingers brushed lightly when we returned the phones to each other. I pulled my hand away quickly at the warm sensation of his skin touching mine.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Mase," Sam said with a wink before turning away back to his friends.

I stood still, dumbfounded for a moment. I couldn't understand why I was being affected by Sam in the way that I was. It felt like every time he looked at me I melted into a puddle. Just by his look, he had the power to turn anyone to dust. I didn't want him to have that power over me.

When I returned to the table, all of my friends were staring at me. I placed Bella's drink in front of her while taking a sip of my own. I could feel the presence of Sam directly behind me and it took everything in me not to turn around just to look at him.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," Bella whispered harshly.

"Later," I dismissed her, not wanting Sam to hear us talking about him.

Pete carried the conversation for the rest of dinner. He was good at bringing down tension and making everyone forget for the moment being. However, when we got in the car, after I bid Sam another goodbye, the questions were hurled at me.

"How do you know him?"

"Are you friends with him?"

"What's going on?"

I let out a sigh and rested my head on the window before answering. "He just started working at the bakery. I'm training him."

"Working with him?" Bella asked incredulously. "So you have to see him everyday?"

I nodded and hummed in agreement.

"That could turn out bad," Bella commented with a shudder.

"What do you mean?" I asked, turning around in my seat to face her.

"What if he tries to use you to get to Nathan or the team?" she pointed out with her eyebrows raised.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "He's not a bad guy and we have to *work* together. He's not going to do anything to make working together unbearable."

"I kinda agree with Bella on this," Pete interjected. "Don't get too close to the guy. He knows how much sleeping with our cheerleaders gets to Nathan, imagine what befriending his brother could do."

Ross scoffed in the driver's seat. "You're both being ridiculous. Not everything is a fucking scheme."

I was thankful for Ross's input in that moment. He always seemed to have a level head and good reasoning. It felt good when he was on your side because his opinions were trustworthy.

That was the last we spoke about Sam for the night.

04

Mason Maloney

I looked out the window at the driveway with a scowl on my face and my arms crossed. Nathan never came home last night, meaning the car was nowhere to be found and I had to be to work in half an hour. I contemplated what I could do. If I left now, I might be able to get there just a few minutes late by walking. Or, I could wake my parents up and ask one of them for a ride, but then I would be ratting out Nathan. I shouldn't care about him getting in trouble, but since I'm a good brother I did.

My other options were calling my friends to see if they would be awake this early in the morning or calling Sam. I didn't want to bug Sam by making him drive out of his way to come get me, but I was desperate. Before I could stop myself, I pressed the call button on his contact and he picked up within a few seconds.

"Mason?" he answered through the phone.

"Hey, Sam. Sorry for calling, but I was just wondering if you could come pick me up? If not it's fine, I can walk-"

"You're not walking. I'll be there in ten minutes," Sam cut me off before hanging up the phone.

After I was all dressed, I went downstairs and made coffee, pouring it in two travel mugs. I left them both black since there was cream and sugar at the bakery and I didn't know how Sam took his. Since he was picking me up, the least I could do was bring him a coffee. As I was screwing the lid on the second travel mug, my phone dinged with a text from Sam.

Here

I hurriedly finished screwing the lid on and grabbed both mugs before scurrying out of the house. Sam's car was in the driveway with him in it,

looking down at his phone. I hopped into the passenger's seat and placed the mugs in his cup holders.

"Sorry for calling, Nath-"

"You don't need to apologize," Sam cut me off smoothly with a grin. "Idiot brother has the car?"

I nodded as Sam pulled out of my driveway and headed toward the bakery. I really didn't want to talk about Nathan with Sam since I knew Nathan wouldn't appreciate it at all.

Sam and I got out of the car after he parked in front of the bakery. I grabbed both the mugs as we walked toward the building. It was evident that Charlene was already there baking up a storm. Her car was parked behind the building and she had all the lights on in the bakery.

"Here, I brought you this," I said to Sam, handing him the mug after I rung the bell for Charlene to unlock the door.

"What is it?" he asked, taking the mug in his hand.

"Coffee," I answered. "It's black. I didn't know how you took it."

Sam nodded and took a small sip of the coffee. I gave him a disgusted look to which he shot me a happy grin.

"I usually put in a little bit of cream, but I like it black too," he told me, chuckling slightly at the look on my face.

Soon enough Charlene came to the door to let us in. She had a wide smile on her face along with some flour smudged on her cheek.

"Boys!" Charlene exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Good morning, Charlene," Sam greeted kindly.

Charlene took Sam's tall frame in her arms for a bone-crushing hug. It was quite comical to see the two of them next to each other. Charlene was a

petite old woman while Sam was a tall and muscular football player. He looked to be about twice her size.

"Come here, Mase," Charlene ordered with her arms open wide after she had released Sam.

After my hug with Charlene, she went back to the kitchen to finish baking. She must have been here for hours already since she had about half of the shelves filled with pastries and other bakery items.

I put some cream and sugar in my coffee and took a sip before turning to Sam who was also sipping on his own coffee.

"So you can count the drawer and then we are going to add stuff to the inventory," I told him, pointing over to where Charlene had placed the drawer.

Sam walked over to the register and printed out the report he needed to see if the drawer was even. I took another sip of my coffee before joining him at the register and pulling up the inventory sheet on the computer. I didn't notice how close we were standing to each other until I bumped into him when I reached for my coffee. It was like the time he asked me to tie his apron for him. We were closer than we ever had been and it made it hard for me to breath. Just his aura was enough to put me on edge.

"The drawer is all set," Sam said, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Oh, uh, good," I replied awkwardly.

Charlene came out of the kitchen to save me from the awkwardness I had created. She was holding a tray of muffins before she set them down on the counter next to Sam.

"Can you boys put these out please?" she asked before returning to the kitchen without waiting for an answer.

Sam picked up the tray and shot me a smile before he went over to where the muffins were to be put on the shelves. He was about to pick one up

before I stopped him.

"You have to wear gloves when you put the product away," I told him, grabbing the disposable gloves from behind the counter.

"Right," Sam responded with a nod, placing the tray down before grabbing two gloves from the box.

Once the gloves were situated on his hands, he began putting the muffins away on the shelves. I stood behind him and watched as he did his work, seeing how his back muscles moved beneath his shirt. I felt as though my eyes glazed over, fully intending on staring at Sam all day.

"Are you staring at my ass?" he asked playfully, still facing away from me.

This caused me to shoot my gaze away from him. I mumbled a quick "no" before walking away from him and into the kitchen with Charlene. At least she didn't make me so nervous.

"Need any help?" I asked her as she was mixing batter.

She shook her head. "I just need you to help Sam get into the swing of things."

"He already seems to know how to do everything up front," I told her honestly.

"Maybe you can start teaching him some stuff back here," Charlene suggested with her eyebrows raised happily.

"I told him we could do that next week," I answered, hoping she wouldn't force me to do it today.

She nodded. "That's fine."

I could only imagine what being alone in the kitchen with Sam would be like.

***

I tried not to scowl at Sam as he charmed the girl he was serving at the counter. She was obviously interested in him, twirling her hair with her finger as she spoke. I caught him throw a wink her way before he turned around to retrieve some cookies for her. I couldn't hold back my glare as he finished cashing her out and she wrote her number on the back of her receipt before slipping it into Sam's hand and walking away. He just laughed and I scoffed while shaking my head.

"What?" he asked me with a grin.

"Are you going to flirt with all of our customers?" I asked him rather harshly, not intending to.

Sam just chuckled again and crumpled up the receipt before throwing it in the trash.

"Don't hate on my customer service techniques," Sam joked with a smile.

I felt a little better after seeing him discard her number without a second thought.

I scoffed and rolled my eyes playfully, crossing my arms. "Flirting is not a customer service technique."

Sam shrugged with a grin. "Well, it sure works like one."

I couldn't argue with him about that. He had been flirting away with every girl that walked in here today and they all seemed to leave here satisfied. I was sure they would all be coming back to the bakery soon just to see Sam again.

Later on when our shift was almost over, I noticed the friends Sam was with last night at Chipotle walked in and went straight to where Sam stood at the counter.

"Sam!" one of the guys shouted loudly.

"Hey!" Sam greeted his friends enthusiastically.

I tried not to stare at their interaction, but for some reason it was always hard for me to look away from Sam. It was like my eyes were glued to every move he made. I noticed the way his slender legs looked like they went on for miles in his tight fitting jeans and how his t-shirt hugged his broad shoulders perfectly, showing off his athletic yet lean build.

I was so preoccupied with staring at Sam's body, I hadn't even noticed that he had served his friends and they were getting ready to leave.

"Is your shift almost over? Are you up for chilling at my place?" a blonde boy asked, holding a brown bakery bag.

Sam shook his head. "I have plans, maybe later though."

And with that, his friends bid Sam and goodbye and left through the bakery door, the bell chiming on their way out. I sighed, walking over to Sam to look at the time on the computer. Our shift was ending in ten minutes, but we wouldn't be able to leave until our replacements showed up. I knew I could trust Sandy to be on time, but another employee, Rachel, was a different story.

"Mason," Sam called out, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Yeah?" I asked, looking toward him where he stood, leaning on the counter.

"Want to grab some lunch after this?" he asked me seriously.

"I thought you had plans," I reminded him of what he had just told his friends.

He looked at me strangely, as if wondering how I knew that, before a look of realization flooded his sharp features.

Sam nodded. "I meant to ask you to lunch earlier," he told me.

I let a look of surprise cross my face at his admittance. To say I wasn't excited about Sam wanting to hang out with me would be a lie. I was drawn

to him for whatever reason I couldn't explain, but the feeling of intrigue was present.

"Uh, sure, I'll go," I stammered awkwardly.

He made me feel beside myself. I was never a shy, stuttering kid, but for some reason Sam made me that way. Maybe it was because I knew how much he and my brother didn't get along. It could have been because I was nervous about Sam telling someone about the two of us hanging out and that information finding its way back to Nathan.

I was sure that was it.

Sam gave me a wide smile and I swore I saw his white teeth sparkle.

"Cool," was all he said.

Cool.

Cool.

Cool.

Sam was smoother than I was and cooler too. Maybe that's why I was nervous around him. Though, I never really cared what people thought of me. He just seemed too *cool* to want anything to do with me.

"Am I late?" Sandy questioned hastily as she scurried behind the counter. I hadn't even noticed her come in.

I checked the time on the computer and rolled my eyes. "You're five minutes early."

Sandy let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, I saw Rachel in the parking lot and thought there was no way she was here on time."

"She won't actually come in until ten minutes after her shift starts," I reminded Sandy with a chuckle.

Sandy nodded before flirtatiously greeting Sam. She placed a hand on his arm and leaned in as she giggled at something he said. I could've vomit at the sight, but instead walked back to the kitchen to hang up my apron. I was soon followed by Sam.

"Do we have to wait for this Rachel girl to come in?" he asked, neatly hanging his apron on the hook beside mine and raking a hand through his messy black hair.

I thought for a moment. Usually, I would stay with Sandy until Rachel arrived so she wouldn't have to be here alone. However, I couldn't deny that the last thing I wanted to do was hang around the bakery while I had a lunch with Sam waiting for me.

"I'm sure Sandy will be fine for a few minutes," I answered him with a shrug, leading him back out to the front of the store.

Sandy looked up from the money she was counting when she heard Sam and me return from the kitchen. She smiled widely and then looked back down at the money with a blush crossing her cheeks. My gaze drifted to Sam to see that he was smirking at her with his perfect teeth showing slightly. I glared at him and shook my head.

"We're heading out," I announced to Sandy.

She sighed and looked out the window to see Rachel still sitting in her car. "Alright, see you guys later."

"Bye Sandy," Sam said in an alluring tone, winking at her.

I could feel her heart fluttering from where I stood.

I walked out of the bakery ahead of Sam, holding the door open for him. As he walked over to his car, I made my way to Rachel's old beat up Chevy and tapped on the driver's window. She didn't stop tapping away on her phone as she looked up at me with her deep brown eyes.

"Go inside and help Sandy," I ordered, nodding my head toward the bakery door.

Rachel groaned, opening her car door and smacking me with it. I stumbled slightly at the contact and shot her a scowl. Before I could say anything else to her, she looked behind me and her face instantly lit up.

"Is that the hot new guy Sandy was telling me about?" Rachel asked excitedly, pointing behind me.

My gaze followed where her finger pointed to see Sam leaning against the hood of his car, looking down at his phone. His black hair hung by his eyes and every so often he would try and push it back, but it just fell again.

I looked back at Rachel, the scowl still on my face. "Go inside."

"You're no fun," she retorted, sticking her tongue out at me before sauntering inside and swaying her hips to get Sam's attention.

I hurriedly walked over to Sam's car where he stood. When he saw me approaching, he sent me a smile before sliding into the driver's seat. I threw myself into his car, unintentionally slamming the door shut.

"So that's Rachel," Sam commented as he pulled the car away from the bakery.

"Yep," I answered blandly, resting my head on the window.

"She's kinda cute," he added with a smirk.

I shot him a deadly glare, my eyes narrowed and staring at his chiseled jaw. He glanced over at me and his smirk widened.

"I'm just messing around," Sam amended. "She's not my type, but that Sandy girl-"

"Stop," I cut him off, holding my hand up. "You cannot flirt with our coworkers."

Sam shook his head at me. "I will flirt with whoever I want to flirt with, thank you."

I let out a sigh and the rest of the car ride was silent. I didn't bother asking where he was taking me, but when we crossed the train tracks in between our towns I began to feel worried. What would my friends think about me hanging around in Knight territory? What would Nathan do if he found out?

I tried to push those thoughts aside as I looked over at Sam who looked so calm. Nathan and him were so alike, yet so different. They were both hot-headed football players fueled by competition, but Sam seemed to not have a care in the world while Nathan let everything get to him. Maybe that was what set the two apart. Maybe Nathan envied Sam for that.

I know I did.

05

Mason Maloney

The restaurant Sam took me to was small and quaint. The walls were painted a deep red and there was a counter with round cushioned bar stools in front of where the wait-staff stood. Sam chose a booth in the corner for us. On the wall next to our table hung a picture of the restaurant from when it opened in 1953. The black and white photo showed the outside of the diner, looking much like it did now, with a man and a woman standing underneath the large "Patty's" sign, grinning happily.

"This is the best little diner in town," Sam said once we were seated comfortably.

"It's nice," I answered truthfully.

Sam smiled, this time a real smile and not one of his insolent smirks.

"My dad used to take me here for milkshakes all the time," he told me happily. I could feel the nostalgia radiating from him.

"What's the best milkshake to get?" I asked with a smile of my own.

It was nice to see Sam in this way. He wasn't being overly cool and smooth like he always was. He was just being natural, happy, and *him* .

"Classic chocolate," he said seriously. "Definitely chocolate with whipped cream and a maraschino cherry on top."

I looked at him in disgust. "Maraschino cherries are gross."

Sam gasped, holding his hand to his chest. "I'm sorry Mase, I don't think this friendship is going to work out."

I laughed and shook my head at his dramatic reaction. "How about we both get a milkshake and I give you *my* maraschino cherry."

Sam grinned and snapped his fingers. "Friendship restored."

When our waitress came around, the two of us ordered burgers and shakes. Sam assured me that I had to try their burgers since, along with the milkshakes, they were his favorite thing about the small diner. I wished we had a place like this on our side of the tracks. The closest thing I could think of was the bakery. Other than that, all we had were chain restaurants, nothing special. Why did a place like this belong in Knight territory?

"Do you come here a lot?" I asked Sam after our waitress walked away.

He nodded. "I come here with my friends quite a bit and the team has a tradition."

"A tradition?"

Sam nodded again. "We come here every year at the end of hell week."

I nearly groaned on the spot. "You seriously brought me to a Knight hang out spot?"

"Maybe I'm trying to convert you," Sam suggested with a smirk.

"Don't even bother. Nathan would kill me," I answered just before the waitress brought us our milkshakes.

After the waitress left our table with the promise that our burgers would be done soon, I took my cherry out of my milkshake and plopped it into Sam's like I told him I would. He looked at me gratefully before taking one of the cherries and placing it in his mouth, pulling it off the stem and munching on the cherry happily.

I grinned at him before taking my straw in my mouth and sipping on my milkshake. I was instantly consumed with delight on my tongue as the liquid entered my mouth. The milkshake was sweet, but not overbearingly so. This consistency was thick enough to almost resemble ice cream, but

thin enough to be a creamy drink. It was the best milkshake I had ever tasted. It felt like a party on my taste buds.

"It's amazing, right?" Sam asked when he saw the look on my face.

I nodded excitedly, swallowing the shake. "It's so good."

"Everyone needs a Patty's milkshake at least once in their life," Sam replied. "It should be a law."

"Agreed," I answered with a nod.

Suddenly, my phone started buzzing in my pocket. I pulled it out to check the caller I.D. Nathan. I debated on letting it go to voicemail, but decided on answering it.

"What?" I answered not too kindly.

"Where are you?" Nathan asked just as harshly. "I'm at the bakery now."

I could feel my anger building up at him. Did he think I was going to wait around all day for him.

"I got a ride," I told him. "Because you weren't there this morning to drive me."

I tried keeping my voice even and calm since I was out in public, but Nathan had a way of making me angry like no one else could.

"So you're home?" he wondered.

"I'm out at lunch," I responded, leaning back in my seat.

Sam gave me a knowing look as if telling me to refrain from telling Nathan who I was out with. However, at this point Nathan had made me so angry that I wanted him to know I was out with Sam.

"With who?" Nathan snapped like he already knew.

"Sam," I answered blandly.

Nathan was quiet for a moment before he started screaming at me. I could almost feel the heat from his voice through the phone.

"What did I tell you about hanging around with him?" Nathan spat harshly. "Where are you? I'm coming to get you."

"No, you're not," I snapped back quietly. "I'm going to finish my lunch and I'll see you later."

I hung up the phone without a second thought, putting it on silent and shoving it back into my pocket.

"Nathan seemed mad," Sam commented, sipping on his milkshake.

"I don't want to talk about him," I murmured. No matter how mad my brother made me, I didn't want to shit talk him to his enemy.

"I get why he doesn't want us hanging out," Sam said understandingly. "My friends were kinda pissed when they found out I was working with you."

"They were?" I asked, surprised.

Sam nodded. "This whole Knight versus Warrior thing gets kinda out of hand."

"Yeah, it does," I agreed.

I never really liked the rivalry between the two schools. It brought out the ugly side of Nathan that I preferred not to see.

"Why aren't you so worried about the rivalry?" I decided to ask. It seemed like everyone but us in our two schools were hellbent on hating each other.

Sam just shrugged. "I guess I am a little. I won't lie, I don't like your brother, but you're not him and we work together. It's best if at least the two of us get along."

I would be lying if I said his answer didn't somewhat disappoint me. Part of me was hoping that Sam was above the rivalry, that he didn't care about it the way Nathan did, but that wasn't the case. Sam was a football player, a Knight at that, and they all cared about defeating their enemy, proving themselves to be the better team. The rivalry was something he couldn't get rid of, so he had to embrace it.

I just wished that wasn't the case.

***

Nathan came barging into my room as I was sprawled across my bed, reading *Pride and Prejudice* . He knocked the book out of my hand, making it fall on the floor with a thud. I looked up at him with a dark scowl.

"What the hell, Nathan?" I snapped angrily, sitting up.

"What did I tell you about Sam Knight?" Nathan belted loudly. He was lucky our parents weren't home to hear his yelling.

"I don't care what you told me," I answered him truthfully. "You don't control me."

"He's just using you to get to me!" he complained, throwing his hands in the air and leaning closer to me. "And I don't get how you don't see that."

"Maybe because I work with him and we never even talk about you?" I stretched the truth a bit. We rarely talked about Nathan, but it was a lie to say that we hadn't before.

"He wants to throw me off my game, Mason," Nathan responded, lowering his voice.

"It won't get to you if you don't let it," I consoled lightly.

"You don't get it!" he snapped again, sitting down on my bed. "Of course it's going to get to me. You're my brother, how can you hanging around with a Knight not get to me?"

"You seriously need to grow up," I told him with an eye roll. "Besides, Sam and I aren't even really friends. We just work together."

I wouldn't consider Sam one of my friends. We were friendly because we had to spend so much time together, but I couldn't see the two of us hanging out on a Saturday night even though we had grabbed lunch together.

Nathan lied down on my bed, resting his head on one of my pillows. I still sat up, looking down at his angry figure. His anger seemed to have simmered down a bit, but it was still there.

"He's going to pay for what he's trying to do," Nathan said lowly.

"Don't do anything to him," I said with a stern look. "It'll only get you in trouble. Plus, do you really want to start a war with the Knights this early in the season?"

Nathan stood up and walked toward my door. "He started it, not me."

"He's not messing with me, Nate," I told him seriously.

"No, he's messing with me and he's going to pay for it," he answered before leaving my room and slamming my door shut.

I shook my head at his antics, picking my book up off of the floor and placing it down on my bed. I just hoped whatever he decided to do to Sam wasn't too drastic. The last thing Nathan needed was to be getting into trouble just because he had pride issues.

***

I definitely wasn't the athletic twin and that was obvious in gym class on Monday when I was one of the last ones to finish the mile. Ross had stuck around with me for the first lap, but lapped me after that. He was one of the quickest guys in our class so I didn't expect him to wait around for me. He probably just stayed with me at first to warm up.

When I finished the lap, I stood hunched over with my hands resting on my knees. I was panting and could feel my shirt clinging to my body from my

sweat. I was sure I looked *so* sexy like this.

"You weren't the last one," Ross commented, slapping a hand down on my shoulder.

I looked up at him, my panting slowing down. "I really need to get in shape."

Ross shrugged. "All you have to do is improve your mile time by the end of the semester."

I groaned, standing up straight. "I hate running."

Ross just rolled his eyes and slapped me on the shoulder again. "I'll help you."

Ross didn't have much room to improve his mile time since he was always one of the first to finish. I knew he goes slower than he needs to just so he can show improvement for our last mile at the end of the semester.

"What was your mile time?" I asked curiously as we started heading back into the gym.

"6:10," he answered. "But I jogged for a little while, I can probably get closer to five by the end of the semester."

"What was mine?" I hadn't even bothered to look.

Ross laughed and looked away from me. "11:22."

I groaned and threw my head back. An eight minute mile was considered mediocre. I needed to be more in the range of six and a half and under, but there was no way I could see myself doing that. I had to force myself to keep going today and ended up taking over eleven minutes. If I had taken breaks when I wanted to, I probably would have been closer to twelve.

It felt as thought the temperature increased when we stood in the gym. I headed over to the water fountain to get a drink. When the cold water met

my throat, I instantly felt relieved. I didn't want to walk away until I felt someone nudge me on the back.

"Hurry up, Maloney," Rick, one of the kids on the football team, said.

I turned around to face him, stepping away from the water fountain. "You finished before me, you should have gotten water then."

After taking a sip, he looked up at me. "Shut up. I wouldn't be snippy with me when I heard that you've been hanging around with a Knight, no, *the* Knight."

I rolled my eyes and leaned against the wall, crossing my arms over my chest. "Nathan told you?"

Rick nodded. "Let's just say we have some things in store for your friend Sam."

I sighed and pushed myself off of the wall, walking away toward Ross. It was useless to talk to Rick about this. He would just do whatever Nathan wanted him to and I knew that. It was also useless to reiterate what I had been saying to Nathan ever since I started working with Sam. He would never understand it, just like he thought I would never understand his side.

The only thing I could think of to do was warn Sam, but I didn't know what to warn him about. I wouldn't see him today since Charlene had given us today off. I knew Nathan wouldn't do anything to physically harm Sam, he would just pull some stupid prank. Before I could go into the locker room to get my phone, our gym teacher blew his shrill whistle and told us we were going to be playing handball for the rest of class.

Warning Sam would have to wait.

***

As soon as I got into the locker room, I pulled out my phone and texted Sam.

I don't know what's going on, but I think Nathan's going to pull something so just be aware.

I didn't know what else I could say to him. Pranks weren't that big of a deal. Nathan and the team pulled them on each other all the time. He pulled them on me, it was just something he did. But pranks between the Warriors and Knights were different. One prank would inevitably start a war between the two teams and they wouldn't be harmless. Nathan and a few of his teammates had almost gotten suspended for their war with the Knights our sophomore year.

It became a problem when small pranks weren't good enough and they had to keep getting bigger and better. Vandalizing the Knights' locker room was a prank that went too far and they would have gotten in big trouble if the Knight hadn't done it to us. The schools decided each team would clean up their mess and that would be their punishment since neither school wanted to lose a chance at championships. It was obvious both schools favored the football team.

Sam was quick to reply to me and what he said left me curious and confused.

He already did

06

Mason Maloney

The bakery was slammed Tuesday afternoon and Sam was late. I knew he had practice until at least 3:30, but it was past four and he still hadn't shown up. And of course, the day he was going to be late was the day I was here by myself and a million people came in needing to fill out cake orders or buy two dozen donuts or just drive me insane. I was manning the register while also arguing with Sandy on the phone.

"Sandy, I need help. Sam's not here and it's super busy," I pleaded, handing a customer their change.

"I worked yesterday and didn't call you to come in on your day off," she reminded me like she already had three times before.

"You had two other people with you yesterday," I told her, trying to keep my voice calm in front of the customers.

"I still didn't call you," she said. "Sam's cute, but I don't want to do him any favors and get nothing in return."

I bit my lip to keep myself from groaning. "First of all, you'd be doing me a favor, second of all you'd be getting paid."

Thankfully, Sam walked in before Sandy said anything else. His hair was wet and messy as he ran his hand through it, hurriedly walking by the line of customers to get behind the counter.

"Never mind, he's here," I said and hung up before Sandy could respond.

"Nice of you to show up," I said in an annoyed tone as Sam threw his apron on.

He sent me a glare. "Practice ran late."

I knew that Charlene hired him knowing that his football schedule could be unpredictable, but I was still annoyed that he was late. I was probably more annoyed at him because I had texted him last night so he could tell me what Nathan did, but he ignored me. Then, when I asked Nathan what he did, he wouldn't tell me.

"Whatever, you do the register," I said, walking toward him. "I have to refill the shelves."

I didn't wait for a response before walking into the kitchen and grabbing a tray of donuts to put out on the nearly empty shelves. Sam was moving quickly to get all the customers what they wanted. He bumped into me and nearly made me drop the tray I was holding, but didn't say anything as he grabbed two blueberry muffins and finished that order.

I spent the next half hour filling shelves while Sam took care of the customers. The line had finally died down and the two of us could breathe. I rested against the shelf behind me and closed my eyes for a moment. Who decided Tuesday was bakery day for the crazies?

"What went on yesterday?" I decided to ask Sam. He couldn't ignore me when we were face to face.

He just shrugged. "Don't worry about it."

I didn't know why I wanted to know, but I did. Sam was acting strange about the whole situation.

"Nathan's an ass sometimes–"

"Just shut up about Nathan!" Sam snapped. "He got his payback."

"What?" I asked incredulously. "Practice didn't really run late today did it? You just retaliated against Nathan."

Sam shrugged. "He got what was coming to him. He messed with my car, so I messed with his."

Anger instantly filled me. I knew I wouldn't be able to think straight.

"You messed with our car? That's my car too Sam! Did you think about that?" I argued. I didn't care if Sam felt the need to get back at Nathan, I just wished I would be left out of it.

Sam scoffed and crossed his arms. "You barely use it and I did what I had to. It's not my fault you're in the crossfire."

"Yeah, well it's not my fault either so you and Nathan can leave me out of this shit," I spat angrily.

"You're the cause of this shit," he replied icily.

"You're the one that started working here," I reminded him. "What happened to the two of us being civil?"

"That won't work anymore," Sam said, shaking his head. "Whatever friendship we had is done. The only thing between us now is work."

I couldn't understand why he was so angry with me as if I had done anything wrong. This rivalry was between him and Nathan and he was dragging me into it, exactly like I told him not to.

"Fine," I agreed sternly.

I didn't want to say anything else. I didn't know what to say. It wasn't like I was losing a friend. Sam and I were never friends, but it was nice to have someone here, besides Charlene, that didn't find some way to annoy me.

"Stay at the register," I ordered. "I have to sort through the cake orders."

"Shouldn't you show me how to do that?" he asked in an annoyed tone.

I was already walking into the kitchen. "Maybe some other time when you're not being an ass."

And that would probably be no time soon.

***

The car was spotless when Nathan picked me up after work. What had Sam done?

Thankfully, Sam had already left. I had him leave early so he wouldn't run into Nathan in the parking lot. That was something that didn't need to happen. He was more than eager to leave the tension in the room.

I cautiously walked to the car and got in the passenger's seat. As soon as I was in the car, I found out what Sam had done. The stench in the car was fowl. It smelled like rotten eggs and cheese mixed with a faint smell of air freshener.

"What the fuck!" I shouted, plugging my nose.

"I'm immune to it now, I think it killed my sense of smell," Nathan replied seriously.

"Open all the windows," I said, still blocking my nose. "Air this thing out, oh my God."

Nathan complied with my request and pulled away from the bakery. I kept my head close to the window so I could smell the fresh air instead of rancidness.

"We played dirty, but he played dirtier," Nathan commented, shaking his head with a scowl on his face.

"What did you do?" I wondered, turning to face my brother.

"Nothing as bad as this," Nathan answered with a gag. "I think he even put stuff in the vents to make it smell."

"You better figure out a way to get the stink out of here," I told him seriously.

There was no way I was going to get in the car again with it smelling like this.

"I tried spraying air freshener and it didn't work," he replied, pulling into our drive way.

"Well try something else," I said, hurriedly getting out of the car and rushing into the house.

I was surprised to see my mother and father in the living room when I walked in. The two of them were usually up in their room by the time I got home. A movie was playing on the TV while my mother leaned into my father's side with his arm around her.

"Hi honey," Mom greeted happily.

"Hi," I answered back, sitting down beside her on the couch. They were watching *The Notebook* .

"How was work?" Dad asked, looking over at me.

I could unleash all my annoyance on them about Sam and Nathan, but I decided not to. They knew about the rivalry between the teams, but they purposely stayed out of it.

"It was busy and I was by myself dealing with it for over an hour," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Why were you alone?" Mom wondered curiously.

This was when Nathan decided to come waltzing into the house and then sat down beside me.

"Because his coworker is unreliable, maybe he should get fired," Nathan suggested rudely.

I rolled my eyes, but didn't say anything else. It was pointless to argue about Sam with him, especially since Sam had ended whatever positive relationship there was between us.

We all decided to go upstairs after the movie ended. I was lucky enough to have finished all of my homework at school, so I sat on my bed reading

Pride and Prejudice .

"Do you have to read that for a class?" Nathan asked after barging into my room.

"Learn to knock," I said without looking up from the page.

I felt the bed dip as Nathan sat beside me. "Don't you have an open door policy?"

"No," I answered blandly.

"What if I told you that this twin really needs to talk to his twin," Nathan basically pleaded.

I lowered my book down and looked up at him curiously. I knew that Nathan put on a confident act all the time, but there were times like this where he let himself be vulnerable.

"What's up?" I asked with concern.

Nathan lied back on my bed, staring up at the ceiling. I still sat up, looking down at him. It was hard to miss seeing the thoughts swimming around in his head as he tried to find the right words to say.

"I've just been thinking lately," he started. "What if I'm not good enough for college football?"

His thoughts didn't surprise me. Nathan loved football and this had always been a fear of his. It was why he worked so hard day and night for years to perfect his throw. It was why he was so competitive, but it was also why he was such a good football player.

"Nathan," I said, lying down beside him. "You're an amazing quarterback. You work so hard everyday."

"I know, but what if that's not good enough?" he asked me worriedly. "There are a lot of amazing quarterbacks. Some even around here."

He didn't have to say his name for me to know he was talking about Sam and I knew better than to bring him up.

"You just have to focus on you," I told him truthfully. "Don't worry about those other quarterbacks, only worry about you."

"It's hard," Nathan answered with a sigh. "Because all of us are going after the same thing."

"There are plenty of schools and you can only choose one," I consoled. "Don't be concerned with what those other guys do."

"But there's not plenty of good D1 schools," he pointed out.

I sighed and turned to face him. "Nathan, you work really hard everyday. You need to stop being so hard on yourself because that's only going to affect the way you play."

"You're right," he mumbled, sitting up.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" I joked, sitting up along with Nathan.

"Not saying it again," he said, getting up from my bed and walking toward the door.

"It's alright, I know I'm always right," I teased with a small grin.

"Go back to reading your girly book," Nathan said before leaving my room and shutting the door.

It was times like these that I really enjoyed being around Nathan. He felt more like my brother when he could be vulnerable with me rather than when he was being a lunatic over some made up rivalry that wouldn't matter as soon as we graduated.

***

I was scrubbing the tables while Sam was manning the register. Ross, Pete, and Bella were all sitting at the table next to the one I was at, munching on

muffins they bought here at the bakery.

"Excuse me, waiter," Bella's annoying voice sounded from behind me.

"Not a waiter," I grumbled without turning to look at her.

"Waiter, I would like a lemon square please," she said, sounding as if she was trying not to laugh.

I turned to look at her with a glare on my face. She was giggling quietly while Ross shook his head and Pete grinned widely at me.

"Go to the counter," I told her sternly.

Having to be around Sam for a prolonged period of time really put me in a bad mood. It was beginning to be unbearable working with him since the two of us barely talked and when we did, it was work related.

"I don't want to go talk to Sam," Bella whispered, looking over at him and then back at me.

"Me neither," I responded, turning back to the table I was washing.

"Come on, Mase," Pete started. "We came here to keep you company, the least you could do is be our waiter."

I groaned, throwing the towel I was using down on the table before walking over to the counter to get Bella's pastry. I took out my wallet and pulled out a five dollar bill.

"Lemon square," was all I said to Sam.

He didn't even look at me as he opened the the glass door and pulled out the lemon square for Bella. After he placed it in a bag and put in down on the counter, I handed him the money and waited for my change. Sam shoved the money into my hands, causing me to drop the coins all over the floor.

"Really?" I said with a glare. Sam just shrugged and leaned against the counter.

I bent down to pick up all of the loose change that was dropped before snatching the bag from the counter and bringing it over to Bella. I dropped the bag in front of her and went back to the table I was washing.

I washed all the other tables before my friends decided they were going to leave. Ross, Pete, and Bella walked over to where I stood near the door.

"Tomorrow before the game we are going to start working on your mile time," Ross told me seriously.

I threw my head back with a sigh. "I really don't want to."

"You need to start working on it now or it'll never get better," he reasoned.

"Yeah, and I'll be there to make things interesting," Pete interjected with a grin.

"Please, all you'll do is distract him," Bella argued, crossing her arms.

The two began to argue so I motioned for Ross to get them out of the bakery. After the three of them left, I quickly washed the table they were at before going back over to the counter where Sam was looking down at his phone. I decided not to tell him that he wasn't supposed to be on his phone. First of all, I didn't want to talk to him and second, the bakery was dead so there was really nothing else to do.

Sam looked up when he heard me approach him. He stuffed his phone back into his pocket and stared at me with his arms crossed as he leaned against the shelf behind him. His expression was neutral, but it still bothered me to no end.

"What?" I snapped.

"You can't run a mile?" he asked incredulously.

I rolled my eyes. "I can run a mile, just not quickly."

I was stretching the truth a bit, but I would never admit that to him. When I said I could run a mile, I meant *barely* . I was prone to slowing down every

so often and even taking breaks. Running was definitely not my specialty.

"So I'm guessing athleticism doesn't run in the family?" Sam asked snidely.

"Oh, I'm sorry, are we talking now?" I asked sarcastically to get the attention off of my horrible running skills.

Sam rolled his eyes and looked away from me. "Nope."

So then we sat in silence for the rest of the night.

07

Mason Maloney

My whole body was on fire as I lied in the soft grass of the football field. I felt like I could barely breathe even though my breaths were deep. Ross stood over me with his hands on his hips shaking his head.

"You need to be able to do this mile," he said sternly, looking at the stop watch on his phone. "You can't take a break on your second lap."

"I can do what I want," I answered back snidely, still breathless.

"Hell yeah you can," Pete said as he walked over to us.

Pete couldn't run the mile quickly either, but he could still do it faster than I could.

"You need to fix your mile time too," Ross told Pete with a serious look.

Pete waved him off. "It's fine, I can improve it by a few seconds and pass."

I closed my eyes and put my head back down on the grass. Running could be classified as one of my least favorite things to do. I could think of a million other things I would rather be doing. There was no way Ross was going to get me to run another mile tonight. Besides, we had to leave the field soon for the football game.

"Get up, Mase," Ross pulled me out of my thoughts.

I opened one eye and groaned as I saw Ross and Pete standing over me. I held my arms up, signaling for them to grab my hands and pull me up. Ross and Pete pulled me up into a standing position before Pete handed me a full water bottle. I nodded at him graciously and chugged the water.

"We have to get out of here, the football players will be here soon," Ross said as I finished off my water.

I just nodded, feeling too tired to even speak. I was *really* out of shape despite not being overweight.

"Your place, Mase?" Pete asked with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes but nodded anyway. We took Pete's car from the field to my house. By the time we were at my house, I was done feeling like I was dying.

"Hey, boys," my mother said cheerfully as the three of us walked into the house.

"Hello Mrs. Maloney," Pete said politely, giving her a quick hug.

Once we were safely in my room, I smacked Pete hard on the head, causing him to cry out in pain and Ross to start laughing hysterically.

"Stop your obsession with my mom," I told Pete sternly.

I didn't remember when it started, but Pete has had a crush on my mom for a while. Not only was it strange, it was completely gross and I wasn't okay with it.

"She's a good looking lady," he answered with a shrug, throwing himself down on my bed.

"She's married to my dad," I reminded him.

"Minor detail," Pete replied, waving me off.

It wasn't a minor detail, as Pete called it, but I was done discussing his strange attraction to my mother.

"You're disturbing," Ross told him with a disgusted look, sitting next to him on my bed. Pete just shrugged with a smug smile on his face.

I sat at my desk chair and pulled my phone from my pocket, noticing I had a text from Bella. She was hanging out with some of her friends from her book club before the game and she made it clear that she did not want to be running around the track with us.

Party at Tony's tonight. You guys in?

Parties weren't necessarily a common occurrence in our town. It wasn't like there was one thrown every Friday night after a game, so when someone was hosting a party, the majority of the school and even people from surrounding towns showed up. There was no doubt it my mind that there would be some Knights there, but the rivalry was usually put to a halt in the name of having a good, drunken time.

"Party at Tony's," I said aloud to let Ross and Pete know.

"Yes!" Pete exclaimed. "Finally!"

Ross rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I guess I'm the DD?"

I gave him a sheepish smile. "If you don't mind."

"This means we have to pregame," Pete said, sitting up and looking serious. "So we're ready to get fucked up later."

I laughed at Pete's reasoning and stood up from my desk chair before kneeling down and reaching under my bed. It took me a few moments of feeling around, but I eventually found the glass bottle of clear liquid that I had kept stashed. Pete let out an excited cheer when I showed it to him and held out his hand.

"Take it easy," Ross said sternly as I handed Pete the bottle of gin.

"Okay, Dad," Pete said before tearing off the cap and taking a long sip.

Pete removed the bottle from his lips with his face scrunched up in discomfort before he started coughing.

"Maybe you should take it slow," I teased, taking the bottle from him and taking a significantly smaller sip, the alcohol immediately burning my tongue and throat as it ventured into my mouth.

This stuff seriously tasted like rubbing alcohol.

"Mason!" my mother called out as she opened my bedroom door. I quickly placed the bottle of alcohol under my bed, careful not to spill it.

"Yeah?" I asked, slightly breathless, knowing she would kill me if she found out I had been drinking.

"Do you want to head to the game with us? Or are you three going together?" she asked with a curious expression.

"We're all going to Pete's after so we will just go together," I lied nonchalantly. My mom didn't seem suspicious as she nodded and left my room, closing the door tightly.

"Going to my house are we?" Pete questioned with a smirk.

I shook my head at him and smacked his shoulder. "There's no way we can come back here drunk."

Pete's house was always our safest option when we needed a place to go when we were trashed. His room was on the first floor of the house while his parents' room was on the third. It put a safe distance between us and any chance at getting in trouble. We could just go in through the back and didn't have to climb any stairs. Not to mention, his parents rarely ever went to his room, so it was the ideal location.

I grabbed the gin out from under my bed when I was sure my mother was back downstairs. I took a modest sip before handing it off to Pete who decided to take another gulp. Pete let out a pained noise but took another sip of the drink anyway.

Idiot.

***

Tony's house wasn't anything spectacular. It wasn't huge, but it wasn't small either. The house was a light blue with awful bright red shutters that stood out even in the darkness. The reason why Tony's house was perfect for parties was the location.

The driveway was long and far away from the road. His entire property was surrounded by tress, no neighbors in sight. The yard was spacious and always well-kept. The parties here could get wild without the worry of the cops showing up because it was so far away from everything. It was secluded in its own small area, so when Tony's parents were away, it was party central.

The entire student body headed here after the Warriors won their game. Nathan's throwing was nearly perfect, completing all but two passes. After all his worrying about not being good enough, Nathan was on his A-game tonight, creating an upward momentum for the rest of the season. There was no doubt in my mind that he was good enough to play wherever he wanted for college.

Pete was sitting next to me next to me on the patio set outside, making out with a cheerleader who was in his lap. He was shitfaced by the time we got to the game and Ross had to keep him at bay for the two hours we were there. Pete had sobered up a bit, but as soon as we made it to Tony's he was shitfaced again.

Ross sat on a chair across from us, looking down at his phone, no doubt trying to ignore Pete and his girl.

I had lost count of how many drinks I had, but I knew that I was past drunk. The drunk moods I had varied. I didn't think there was much I could do to control them. Sometimes I was a fun drunk, dancing around, making out with girls, and having a good time. Other times I was a funny drunk, being so out of it that I had no idea what was going on. Tonight I was more of a moody drunk, swallowing my sorrows out of a solo cup.

"I'm getting another drink," I slurred, placing a hand on Ross's shoulder.

Ross looked up at his phone. "Are you sure you should have more?"

"I'm fine Ross!" I exclaimed, trying to sound excited. "Don't you worry about me!"

I stumbled off away from the patio to go back inside. In the kitchen, I found Tony, Rick, Nathan, and Tony's cousin Christo. I was surprised to find the four of them mingling considering Christo was a Knight. I was sure Tony and his cousin got along fine, the two of them not involving themselves in the rivalry when it concerned the other, but I didn't expect Nathan to willingly hang around Christo. Not to mention, I had seen Christo hanging out with Sam when I bumped into him at Chipotle.

"Fill me up," I ordered, shoving my cup into Nathan's chest.

"I think you've had enough," Nathan told me sternly, throwing my cup in the trash.

He could always hold his liquor better than I could. I could tell he wasn't sober by the way he stood, looking relaxed and the way his eyes appeared to be dimmer, but he was a lot more sober than I was.

"Oh no, you threw my cup away. Whatever will I do?" I said sarcastically, reaching across the island and grabbing another solo cup. Nathan was quick to snatch it out of my hand.

"I mean it, Mase," Nathan growled, more serious than before. "You need to stop. I'm not letting you get alcohol poisoning."

Tony nodded, agreeing with Nathan. "Just take a break man, you look like you've seen better days."

"Who's driving you tonight?" Nathan asked me worriedly, knowing the both of us couldn't drive.

I just shrugged, even though I knew it was Ross. Ross had never been one to drink much, so he was usually our designated driver. Sometimes I felt bad that he always had to take care of us, but then I got drunk and didn't care anymore.

"If you have no one to drive you, then you're staying here," Nathan ordered, seeming like he had already sobered up.

I groaned and looked around the room. My eyes widened as they landed on none other than Sam Knight. He sauntered through a crowd of people dancing, making his way to where we stood in the kitchen. I turned back to Nathan.

"Sam will drive me," I told him seriously.

Nathan looked behind me and his face immediately darkened. "No, he won't."

"Sam doesn't like me anymore, but he said he would give me a ride anytime," I explained, taking Nathan's cup from his hand and downing the rest of his drink.

"Mason!" he shouted in annoyance.

"Sam's my DD," Christo started. "I'm sure he would drive your brother home."

Nathan instantly send a glare toward Christo and shook his head. "No."

Soon enough, Sam had made his way to us and went to stand beside Christo, looking annoyed. He didn't make eye contact with me even though I was staring intensely at him. Sam's hair looked like he had just pushed it back a few moments ago, with one strand falling back into his face. He looked composed yet irritated and definitely ready to be out of my presence.

I couldn't will myself to speak to him. I was content with staring at his confusingly handsome face. If I was sober, I would have been pissed at myself for the thought of Sam being handsome even crossing my mind, but I was drunk so I really didn't care. He *was* handsome.

"Let me finish this drink," Christo said to Sam. "Then we can head out."

Sam just nodded and looked down at the floor, crossing his arms and familiarly leaning back on the counter. It was something that he always did,

but tonight it felt like he was doing it to put distance between us and for some reason that made me feel shitty. I looked over at my brother who looked like he was doing everything in his power to keep his eyes away from Sam Knight. I rolled my eyes and poured myself a drink with his cup without Nathan noticing.

"Have a drink and loosen up, Nate," I said to him before leaving the kitchen that suddenly felt overcrowded and unwelcoming.

When I reached the patio where I left Pete and Ross, I noticed Pete had a new girl on his lap. A red head this time. I also noticed Bella was sitting in my spot along with one of her friends from her book club. She was animatedly telling a story, using her hands wildly. The girl beside her looked so entranced with whatever Bella was saying. The two of them let out matching shrieks and I fought the urge to cover my ears.

"Do not make that noise ever again," I demanded before sitting in the chair beside Ross.

"Hey Mase," Bella said with a wave, seemingly surprisingly sober.

I shushed her with a finger to my lips before leaning back in my cushioned chair and closing my eyes. At this point in the night, I was done hearing anyone talk. I wanted to sit in silence, sipping on my liquor and relaxing. A party was obviously not the best place to relax.

After closing my eyes, it felt as though my other senses were heightened. I could smell the wood burning in the fire a few feet away. It smelled like pine and maple, but the smokey smell was overbearing. I could hear the squeals of excited, drunken girls who sat it a circle around the fire playing some sort of party game.

I didn't know how long it was that I sat back like that, but eventually Ross tapped my shoulder and told me that we were going to be leaving. I quickly downed the rest of my drink and got up to follow my friends out, leaving my cup out on the patio. I rubbed my head, already feeling a headache forming.

Bella was babbling on and on to Ross, who seemed like he didn't give a shit.

"Bella, Bella, Bella," I started, stopping her from speaking as we got to Ross's car, the two of us sliding into the back seat. "What has gotten you so excited?"

She leaned over in the seat and rested her head on my shoulder with a happy sigh.

"I had a really good night," she told me as Ross started driving down the eternal driveway.

"What did ya do?" I slurred, resting my head on her's.

"I hooked up with Sam Knight."

08

Mason Maloney

I had always been cursed with killer hangovers. The first time I had gotten drunk, which was my freshman year of high school, I had really overdone it. Without ever having a drink before, I drank way too much too quickly and ended up blackout drunk within an hour. The hangover I suffered the next day legitimately made me feel like I was dying. Nathan had to make up some excuse for me to make sure my parents didn't know I had been drinking. Ever since then, I had always tried to pace myself better.

The hangover I was suffering from today was nowhere near the caliber of my first one, but that didn't mean it was pleasant. I was glad to have the afternoon shift today, rather than the morning one, so I could sleep in longer.

Sam stood at the register, talking to a customer, while I leaned my pounding head against the cold, glass pastry case as I glared at the back of his head. We had just gotten through a rush and as soon as this last customer left, the two of us would be alone. We hadn't been alone all day, the two of us not having spoken a word to each other.

"Can you stop with the death glare?" Sam tore me from my thoughts.

I hadn't even realized the customer he was with had left. Sam was now turned around, facing me and leaning against the counter. I couldn't stop myself from glaring at him due to the knowledge I had of him and Bella.

"I'm not happy with you," I mumbled quietly, fearing that if I spoke any louder my head would explode.

"Excuse me?"

"You and I are barely on speaking terms and then you choose to hook up with one of my best friends. Really?" I said louder this time, my head

throbbing with each word.

"That's none of your business," Sam growled angrily.

"It is when I know you're going to hurt her," I replied instantly, not daring to take a step forward in fear that any motion would cause me to vomit.

"Bella knows not to expect anything from me," he told me. "So mind your own business.

I closed my eyes in annoyance and rested my face against the cold glass of the cabinet. It was obvious that I was in no shape to work, but I didn't want to call out and leave Sam here all by himself, though I was sure he wouldn't think twice about doing that to me.

"You should just go," he said. "You look like shit."

I felt like it too.

I opened my eyes to see Sam giving me a look of disgust. It made me want to shrivel up and hide myself from him out of shame. I couldn't understand what had changed his opinion of me. Why had something Nathan did make Sam hate me?

It was then that I realized I missed the old Sam, the one that was tolerable. The two of us weren't friends, but it had felt like we were on our way there. He used to be intriguing and easy to be around, but a switch flipped in him and he was unrecognizable. This Sam was harsh and unwelcoming and I didn't like it one bit.

"Thanks for the concern," I choked out weakly, doubling over slightly.

"You did this to yourself," Sam pointed out harshly.

My head was pounding and I was starting to feel dizzy, but I was still planted in the spot I had been for the last few minutes. I slowly slid down the side of the cabinet to sit myself on the floor. I groaned as the movement made my stomach feel queasy.

"I'm just going to rest here," I muttered sadly.

My stomach lurched in pain, causing me to cry out in agony. I hugged my knees to my chest as I tried to hold myself together. I just wanted to cry, but I wouldn't ever let myself do that in front of Sam. Not since he had become so distant.

"You can't sit there," Sam said, standing over me. "You can't look like you're dying in front of the customers." I knew he was right, but I was beyond thinking rationally.

I groaned, resting my head on my knees. I really wanted him to leave me alone. Why couldn't he just leave me alone?

"Get up, Mason," Sam commanded, kicking my leg lightly with his foot.

"Leave me alone," I pleaded weakly.

I was not in the mood to be dealing with Sam. For some reason he had me feeling a plethora of emotions that I couldn't even comprehend. Sam had done nothing but annoy me and make me angry since he cut off our friendship, but now that I was sitting in pain beneath him, I felt sadness.

"Get up!" he snapped harshly.

Still, I stayed put and groaned in pain. I heard Sam let out a curse before he grabbed me by my upper arms harshly and dragged me on the floor to the kitchen. The way his hands pinched my skin caused me to yelp, but he paid that no mind as he left me alone in the kitchen, lying in a heap on the floor.

I couldn't tell the exact reason for my annoyance with Sam. The situation with Bella had been haunting my thoughts ever since last night when she told me. Although he said that she knew not to expect anything from him, I knew her better than that. Bella tended to get attached easily and there was no doubt that she had fallen into infatuation with Sam. She knew he wouldn't want anything from her, but that wouldn't stop her from hoping and that would hurt her in the end.

While the situation with Bella was a big part of why I was feeling so down, I couldn't help but think the way Sam had been treating me was also a factor. We hadn't spoken much, but the little we had he had been nothing but harsh to me. It could have been because I was in pain that I was being so emotionally sensitive, but maybe I was just more sensitive than I realized. I had done nothing wrong, yet I was suffering the consequences of Sam's anger. I didn't deserve that.

I just had to suffer through the rest of the day with Sam and a hangover, but I doubted if I could even do that.

***

Nathan picked me up after work with Tony, Rick, and another one of his football friends, Hayden, in the car. Since I was the smallest, Rick and Hayden forced me in the middle in the back seat, squishing me between them.
I leaned my head back and let out a sigh. My hangover had finally subsided and now all I wanted to do was sleep.

Tony was singing along loudly with the blaring radio as I tried to drown him out. I noticed Nathan had not gone in the direction of our house so I picked my head up and glared at him.

"Bring me home," I demanded, leaning forward to turn down the radio.

"I just have to run a quick errand," Nathan replied, not looking away from the road.

I let out an annoyed sigh and sat back in my seat. Leave it to Nathan to wait to do his errand until after he picked me up when he had all day to do it.

"What even is this errand?" I asked out of suspicion. I had no idea what he was doing but I knew it was nothing good.

"You don't need to know," Rick answered for him.

"Wasn't talking to you," I muttered, looking at him out of the corner of my eye.

"What did you–"

"Leave my brother alone," Nathan cut Rick off, looking into the rearview mirror.

Rick was an ass. I couldn't understand why Nathan hung around with him.

Nathan pulled into a driveway with a large white house with tasteful black shutters. He quickly got out of the driver's seat and scurried to the front door. Someone was already waiting for him by the time he got there.

"What is he doing?" I asked Hayden, still staring up at Nathan.

"He doesn't need to know," Rick warned, sending a threatening look toward Hayden.

I sent a glare to Rick as Tony turned around to look at the three of us.

"He's just buying some stuff off of Trevor Lawson," Tony told me before turning back around in his seat.

Trevor Lawson was one of the richest kids that went to our school. He had a perfectly clean record and was very obviously going to be the valedictorian at graduation. I hadn't even known that Nathan ever spoke to him considering they were in completely different social circles.

Nathan walked hurriedly back to the car before sliding in. He held a black bag in his hand before he handed it off to Tony and backed out of the driveway. My eyes were glued to the bag, wondering what could possibly be in it.

I began to think that this had something to do with the rivalry, that Nathan was planning to do something else to Sam. The thought of the last prank Sam had pulled caused me to shudder. The smell was still there, but not as bad as it was at first.

We eventually reached home and I quickly got out of the car after Hayden, eager to stop being pressed up against Rick. Once I was out of the car, I realized ours was the only car in the driveway.

"Where are Mom and Dad?" I asked Nathan, warily glancing at the black bag he had clutched in his hands.

"They're away with Gail and Robert, remember?" he answered quickly, mentioning the friends of our parents.

Now that he had mentioned it, I did remember them saying they would be going away for the weekend with their friends. They were less than an hour away, so they trusted us to be here alone. In my opinion, they had too much faith in Nathan.

Nathan hurriedly walked to the house, followed by his friends. I walked slowly behind them, staring at them out of suspicion. The four of them had already claimed the living room as their hang out spot by the time I had gotten inside. I breezed past them without a glance and headed for the stairs, a creak sounding when I stood on the second step.

Once I was in the safety of my own room, I stripped myself of my work clothes and put on some sweatpants, leaving my shirt off since it was still so hot in the house. I settled into my bed and dozed off into a soundless sleep.

***

I woke up to a foul smell. The aroma was strong and smelled of skunk and plant. It wasn't difficult to figure out what it was. I immediately shot out of bed and bounded down the steps. Nathan's head shot to me as he heard the creak on the stairs.

He looked stoned out of his mind.

His eyes were glossy and red while his skin had paled slightly. I could tell just by looking at him that he was scatter-brained and paranoid. His friends didn't look much better as they sat in a circle around the coffee table as they

all stared up at me. Rick was holding onto the joint and decided to take a drag while still looking at me.

"Nathan, what the hell?" I asked, storming into the living room and standing behind him.

"I can't talk to you right now, man," Nathan replied, his hand on his forehead.

I knew I couldn't get angry with him right now. He probably wouldn't be able to comprehend what I was saying and our conversation would get nowhere. Not to mention, I had no idea what he was like when he was high, but I could guess that he wouldn't react well to me screaming at him.

I looked over at the black bag that was now open and empty as it sat on the coffee table next to Nathan's contraband.

"You got weed from Trevor Lawson?" I asked incredulously. Everyone thought that kid was a goody-two-shoes which I guess was the perfect cover for drug dealing.

"You want some?" Nathan asked innocently as Tony handed him the joint.

I actually entertained the idea of getting high with my brother and his friends. It wasn't like I had never gotten high before. Being Nathan's brother meant that I automatically got an invite to every party he was invited to, so I had been to quite a few. Smoking weed wasn't something I did often, but it definitely wasn't new to me. However, Nathan bringing it into our house was beyond stupid and I was going to scream at him for it later.

"No, just put it away," I said as he took a drag, staring at me with glossy eyes. "And fix the smell in here. Mom and Dad do not need to know that you were smoking in the living room."

I could tell by the way he looked at me that my words had gone in one ear and out the other. I shook my head in annoyance and made my way into the kitchen. I debated locking all the cabinets so that when the four idiots got the munchies, they wouldn't eat all of the food in the house.

Instead, I got myself some food and scrunched my nose at he awful smell of pot that was filling the house. Not being able to stand it anymore, I went to the cabinet and relentlessly sprayed air freshener throughout the kitchen.

The boys in the living room made noises of annoyance when I started spraying in there, but I continued to do it.

They deserved it.

**

Thank you for all the votes and comments!!! :) Please let me know what you think. Also, is this update schedule good with everyone? I can maybe try something different if any of you prefer. Let me know!

09

Mason Maloney

"Mason?" Bella asked as I was zoning out, looking down at my pizza at lunch on Monday.

"Hm?" I hummed a reply and looked up. Bella, Pete, and Ross were all looking at me. The boys had annoyed looks while Bella's was hopeful.

"Do you have Sam Knight's number?" she asked innocently, batting her eyelashes.

I groaned. "Why?"

She gave me a deadpanned look. "Because I need it."

"I thought you said we weren't supposed to talk about him here," I reminded her of what she had said at the football game.

Bella rolled her eyes. "We can't talk about him at games."

It seemed like she was just making up the rules as she went along, but I didn't want to push the subject even further.

"I'm not giving you his number," I told her sternly.

"Told you he wouldn't," Pete boasted with a smirk. "You don't need to be getting involved with him anyway."

Bella crossed her arms and pouted, looking down at her salad. I tried not to think about the fact that one of my best friends had sex with Sam, but she made it hard to ignore. It was like she had fallen in love with him afterwards and I knew he did not share those same feelings.

"Yeah, Bella," I agreed with Pete. "He'll just hurt you."

She would only get hurt by his lack of interest. I didn't think he was the type to lead a girl on and break her heart. It was the girls who stupidly fell in love with him that got hurt and I guess Sam really couldn't be blamed for that even if I wanted to be able to blame him. It wasn't like he promised Bella anything more than that night they shared together.

I could tell by the look on her face that Bella wasn't going to give up her pursuit of Sam. She had always been very determined to get what she wanted and right now, she wanted Sam Knight. No one would be able to stop her, no matter what we said.

***

Bella sat at a table by the window in the bakery while Sam and I stood behind the counter. I eyed Bella warily as Sam was taking care of a customer. She had been there for nearly as long as I had, munching on a muffin and reading a book she had for English class. Bella claimed it was quiet here and that she wanted to see me, but I knew the real reason why she was sticking around.

Sam paid her no mind, not even sparing her a glance when she looked longingly at him. It was like he saw right through her or he was blocking her from his memory. I felt bad for thinking it, but I wanted Sam to forget about Bella. I couldn't tell if I wanted this for her sake or my own.

Part of me wanted to believe that I wanted Sam to stay away from Bella purely for her best interest, but the other part knew that wasn't entirely true. I hated the fact that Sam and Bella shared such an intimate moment while he wouldn't even speak to me. I didn't want to call it jealousy, it wasn't like I wanted to have sex with Sam, I just wanted him to at least pay attention to me.

God, I sounded so needy.

"Is your friend obsessed with me or something?" Sam asked, not quietly as he pulled me from my thoughts.

I looked over at him to notice his slightly messy hair was falling into his face. He pushed it back with his hand, a loose strand falling back down on his forehead.

"No," I lied defiantly.

"Right," he said, unconvinced.

I rolled my eyes. "You need a lesson on humility."

He scoffed and shook his head. "It's obvious she wants me."

The two of us glanced over at Bella as she quickly looked away from us to act as if she hadn't been staring.

"Maybe you shouldn't have slept with her," I mumbled, my eyes lingering on my friend.

"Does it bother you?" Sam asked curiously.

He wasn't asking smugly like he was trying to get a rise out of me. It was like he genuinely wanted to know and was surprised at my attitude toward the issue.

"No, it doesn't bother me," I replied, looking back at Sam.

It did bother me.

Sam gave me a thoughtful look. His facial expression had softened back to what it was like when the two of us got along. I missed when he looked at me warmly since now he mostly gave me a cold stare.

"I need this Saturday off," Sam announced, changing the subject.

I stared at him with wide eyes. Him and I were supposed to open the bakery on Saturday morning then the two of us had the Saturday after that off. Charlene tried to make sure she gave everyone at least one Saturday a month off and there was no way someone would want to come in to cover for Sam.

"You need to see if someone will switch shifts with you," I told him with raised eyebrows. I highly doubted anyone would want to take an opening shift that they weren't supposed to work.

"What about that Sandy girl?" he asked, crossing his arms.

I shook my head. "She's working in the afternoon, she won't want to work a double."

"Rachel?"

I shook my head again. Rachel barely made it to her own shifts.

"Well, I'm busy. I can't come in," Sam responded in an annoyed tone.

"We have next Saturday off, it can't wait?" I asked mimicking his tone.

Sam gave me a cold stare. "No, it can't wait."

I felt something inside me snap. Anger and annoyance flooded through my veins as I stood in front of Sam.

"You can't just ditch me!" I snapped loudly.

He put a finger in front of his lips, telling me to quiet down. I looked around the bakery to see that only a bewildered looking Bella sat at one of the tables.

"I don't know what to tell you," Sam said quietly, walking closer to me. "I really have somewhere to be."

"You could have talked to Charlene," I snapped in a hushed tone. "You know Saturday mornings are busy."

I couldn't help but think Sam was ditching me on Saturday for some trivial reason. He had ditched me before to stink up mine and Nathan's car. Who's to say he's not just pulling some stunt with his football team?

Before he could reply, a customer walked in the front door. Sam instantly brightened up as he turned around and his smile only widened when he realized he knew the woman who had walked in.

"Sam!" the woman exclaimed happily. "I need two dozen cookies, can you make that happen?"

Sam looked to me for confirmation and I nodded my head.

"What kind would you like?" I asked the woman kindly.

"Half chocolate chip and half sugar cookie if that's possible," she replied with a sheepish smile. "I totally spaced out on my daughter's class party tomorrow."

I nodded with a smile and walked back to the kitchen to get the box for her cookies. After rummaging through different shelves, I finally found the correct box and went back toward the front of the store to get the cookies from the cases. When I arrived back, Sam and the woman were having a light-hearted, casual conversation.

Sam laughed loudly at something the woman said and shook his head. "Lila would have been pissed."

The woman chuckled happily. "That's why you can't tell her!"

I finished gathering the cookies and closed up the box before setting them easily down on the counter.

The woman looked over at me with her bright eyes. "Thank you, Mason," she said, reading my name tag.

I smiled warmly at her despite my annoyance at Sam. "You're welcome."

Sam rung up her cookies and the two exchanged more casual words while she paid and I stood by awkwardly.

"I'll see you at home, Sammy," the woman said with a small wave.

"Bye, Mae," he responded kindly before she walked out of the bakery.

I moved to lean on one of the pastry cases, leaning my head back on it. I stared at the back of Sam's head, practically burning holes in it. There was no way he should be able to get me so angry, yet he did.

And he was good at it.

***

Bella didn't leave the bakery until we started getting ready to close it up. She bid me a goodbye, but let her eyes linger on Sam who didn't give her the light of day. Bella looked slightly defeated as she looked away from him and walked out of the bakery.

Sam was counting the till while I swept the floor. We had already taken all of the pastries out of the cases and threw away what didn't sell. Sometimes we brought the good stuff home with us since we had to throw it out anyway, but it was best if we didn't do it every day. I was sure Sam didn't tend to eat much of the baked good due to a strict in season diet and I just didn't want to eat like crap all the time.

The two of us didn't speak to each other as we closed up shop. I looked out the window as I swept and sighed. Nathan wasn't here yet. It was almost eight o'clock and if he was going to show up, he would usually be here by now.

"I finished up," Sam said, startling me as he walked up behind me.

I nodded, giving him a blank stare. "Okay."

"So..." he started, pointing out the door. "I'm going to head out."

I shrugged. "Fine."

Sam sighed and muttered something under his breath before walking by me and out the door. I couldn't decide whether I should wait for Nathan in the shop or just start walking home. I pulled out my phone to call him, holding the phone between my ear and shoulder as I continued to sweep.

No answer.

I cursed under my breath and let out an annoyed sigh. I grabbed the broom and brought it back to the kitchen, propping it up against the wall before tearing my apron off and leaving the bakery and making sure to lock the door.

Once I was outside I was hit with cold air and a slight drizzle from the sky. I crossed my arms to hug myself and rubbed my hands against my skin to warm myself up as I started my trek out of the parking lot.

"Mason!" I heard Sam's voice yell. I hadn't even noticed he was still in the parking lot when I walked out. He pulled his car up next to me slowly, then stopped.

I looked over at him expectantly, waiting to hear what he had to say.

"Are you going to walk home?" he asked me, looking slightly worried.

"Yeah," I said nonchalantly, shivering as I did so.

"It's freezing," he said, stating the obvious. "Get in, I'll drive you."

Sam looked at me with his alluring green eyes that could probably charm me into doing anything, but me being the stubborn ass I was, refused.

"I'll walk," I answered, starting to move away from Sam's car.

He drove slowly beside me as I walked away. "Are you crazy? You'll get sick!"

"I'll be fine," I told him, pushing my hair out of my face.

Sam continued to drive slowly beside me as I walked down the sidewalk. He had even put his hazard lights on, prompting other cars to drive around him. I forced myself to continue looking forward, so I wouldn't get sucked in by his handsome face.

What was I saying?

It was no mystery why Sam riled me up so much by doing so little. It was because he confused the hell out of me without even meaning to. I had never thought of another guy as handsome before, but Sam had changed that in me. The two of us were never close, but the second he stopped being kind to me, I felt hurt. He made me feel differently than I ever had before and I didn't like it. I didn't like that if I looked at his concerned face, I would feel obligated to get into his car.

"Mason, get in the car, now," Sam ordered sternly, sounding agitated.

I ignored him, walking forward with water pelting my face.

"I hate your stubborn ass, I really do," he let out angrily, still driving slowly beside me as if I would listen to his demands.

"Than leave me alone!" I snapped, keeping my gaze straight ahead.

"Are you purposely trying to get sick?" he questioned me loudly.

Again, I ignored him. Maybe if I got sick I could call out of work tomorrow and leave him all alone and see how he liked being ditched. Who was I kidding? That wouldn't do anything. He would still ditch me Saturday like he planned on doing. Not to mention, I would never do that if I could help it.

When it came time for me to cross the road into my neighborhood, Sam still followed me, yelling incoherent words as I blocked him out as best I could. By the time I got to my house, I was considerably damp. It didn't rain hard, but I had been walking for half an hour so the water had seeped into my clothes and nearly soaked my hair. Sam stopped outside my house when I started ascending my driveway.

"Go take a warm shower!" he yelled out to me, my back facing him as I reached my front door.

I entered the house and closed the door. I peered out the window to see Sam pulling away from the curb, his taillights dulling with distance.

"Mason, what happened?" I heard my father ask behind me.

I instantly turned around to see him standing before me with his hands on his hips. He took in my appearance as he waited for me to explain.

"Uh..." I trailed, trying to think of an excuse.

"Didn't Nathan pick you up?" Dad asked incredulously.

"No," I squeaked out, fearing that I would be getting my brother in trouble.

"Where is he?" my father demanded.

I shrugged. If I could have gotten a hold of him, I wouldn't have had to walk home.

"You could have called me, Mase," Dad said in a softer tone, pulling his phone out to most likely call Nathan.

I nodded in understanding before breezing by him to get upstairs to my room. Nathan deserved to get in trouble, but I didn't want it to cause a rift between us like I knew it would. He would view this as me ratting him out rather than it being his own mistakes for forgetting me and being unreachable.

Once I was in my room, I quickly stripped out of my wet clothes and slipped on a sweatshirt and sweatpants to warm myself up. I flopped down on my bed and stared up at the ceiling with my hands resting on my stomach.

It was then I decided I was done worrying about whatever tension there was between me and Sam and me and Nathan. I was done worrying about the issues the had with me and with each other.

When I fell asleep that night, I felt lighter.

10

Mason Maloney

I felt like shit.

I rolled out of bed, coughing mucus up from my throat. My nose was running from congestion so I quickly grabbed a tissue to blow it. Once I had finished my coughing fit, I went to the bathroom and almost winced at my reflection.

I looked like shit.

The tip of my nose was an irritated red color while the rest of my face was pale besides the dark bags under my eyes. My hair was messy, sticking up in different directions and my eyes seemed dull.

It was probably in my best interest to stay home from school, but I knew I wouldn't. It was more of a hassle for me to miss school and have to make up work than it was to just go and stay on track. I could make it through the day and then I could just make Sam do everything for me at work.

I would be fine.

Hopefully.

"Holy shit, you look awful," Nathan commented as he walked into the bathroom.

I scowled at him before turning my head into the crook of my elbow to let out a throaty cough. He winced at the raspy sound and turned to lift the toilet seat to take a leak right in front of me. I groaned and turned away, turning on the sink to throw some water on my face.

"I look awful because I had to walk home from work last night in the rain," I croaked out, resting my hands on both sides of the sink.

Nathan's eyes widened as he finished at the toilet and turned to look at me. He zipped his pants and walked over to where I stood at the sink.

"Shit," he let out with a sigh. "Mason, I'm sorry." Nathan shook his head in shame.

I moved away from the sink so that he could wash his hands. An involuntary sneeze sprung up on me, causing an ache in my chest. Nathan winced as I put my hand on my throbbing chest.

"Whatever," I said in a stuffed up voice, now only being able to breathe through my mouth.

"I totally forgot," Nathan replied in an almost pleading tone, like he was begging for my forgiveness.

"How could you forget something you're supposed to do every day?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

It seemed like we had this conversation all too often.

Nathan smiled sheepishly and shrugged. "I'm forgetful."

I just shook my head and left the room.

***

"Are you sure you should be at school?" Ross asked in a grossed out tone.

All of my friends decided they would sit across the table from me at lunch so they wouldn't catch my cold. I was sitting at the table with my head in my hands, eating my mozzarella sticks every so often. I was actually beginning to feel better. My illness felt more like a cold than anything else and my sneezing and coughing had died down quite a bit.

"I'm fine," I told him, looking up to see three pairs of eyes staring at me.

"You could have called one of us to pick you up," Ross pointed out seriously.

The thought had occurred to me, but I was hell bent on defying Sam that I decided to suffer through the cold walk home.

"Not me," Pete interjected. "I passed out so early last night."

Bella shook her head at Pete then turned to me. "Why didn't you just get a ride from Sam?"

I shrugged, letting out a light cough. "We don't get along."

"I'm sure he would have driven you," Bella countered.

I'm sure he would have too. I decided to drop the topic, not wanting to speak more about Sam, especially to Bella. She seemed to be willing to do anything to get me to talk about him. Maybe he was right, she was obsessed with him.

"Do you want to go running after school tomorrow?" Ross asked, changing the subject.

I groaned aloud at his suggestion but nodded in agreement anyway.

Ross smirked. "Perfect."

"You can count me out of that," Pete cut in, shaking his head. "I won't even be there for moral support this time."

"Good," I shot back. "Didn't want you there."

Pete placed a hand over his chest. "Mase, you wounded me."

"I'll drive us to my place after school tomorrow," Ross told me, ignoring Pete. "We can use the trail behind my house."

"We're running on a trail?" I asked in an almost whining tone.

Ross nodded. "I figured it's better than just running around the track a bunch of times."

While Ross was probably right, I wasn't a big fan of being out in the woods. It wasn't that I hated the outdoors, I just hated bugs and the possibility of poison ivy and the threat of getting attacked by an animal.

"Do you think Sam would like me if I was more athletic?" Bella asked curiously, stabbing her salad with her fork.

I threw my head back and groaned. When I brought my head back down to look at her, Bella was giving me a scowl, her green eyes dark and shooting daggers at me.

"No, he won't," Pete answered her with a laugh.

"By the way Bella," I started. "Please don't hang around the bakery today."

Her scowl deepened and Pete let out another obnoxious laugh.

"You stalked him at the bakery?" Pete asked, not able to contain more laughter.

"I hate you guys," was Bella's only response as the lunch bell rang. She was quick to grab her backpack and her tray and head out of the lunch room ahead of us.

"She needs to chill," Ross commented as the three of us made our way out of the cafeteria.

I let out a sigh and nodded in agreement. "I don't know what her problem is. Of all people she has to be after Sam Knight."

"We have to find her a new dude to hook up with, then she will be over him," Pete suggested before he bid Ross and I a goodbye and headed toward his class.

Ross and I stopped in the hallway where we would have to part ways.

"I'll try and keep Bella busy today so she doesn't go to the bakery," he said thoughtfully, adjusting his backpack on his shoulder.

"Take her out somewhere so she won't feel like going to the bakery after," I suggested with a slight smirk.

Ross nodded with a solemn look on his face. "Good idea."

After our exchange, the two of us headed off to our own designated classes. I passed by Nathan and his group of friends as I made my way toward my math class. He gave me a worried look before excusing himself from his friends and catching up to me.

"How are you feeling?" Nathan asked kindly.

I kept walking quickly, but Nathan had no trouble keeping up with my pace.

"Fine," I answered blandly.

"Let me know if you need to go home early," he said.

I could tell he was just trying to suck up to me so I wouldn't be mad at him. That or he was hoping I would want to leave early so that he could leave early.

"I'll be fine," I told him seriously as we stopped outside of my classroom.

Nathan stared into my eyes with an unreadable expression for a few moments before he waved and walked away.

***

Sandy stood at the register, staring longingly at the door as she waited for Sam to come in so she could leave. He was always a little late on days he had practice in the afternoon and Sandy acted as if it was a huge inconvenience for her to stay an extra half an hour.

I was filling the pastry cases when I heard Sandy let out a sigh just like she had been doing for the past twenty minutes. I closed my eyes in annoyance before opening them again and turning to look at her. Sandy leaned on the counter with her head in the palm of her hand as she stared out at the parking lot.

"You can just go," I told her. "Sam will be here soon."

Sandy immediately shot up at the sound of my voice. She turned to face me and gave me a look as if to see if I was actually being serious.

"Don't have to tell me twice," she said before tearing off her apron and bringing it into the kitchen where she would hang it up. She didn't say another word to me as she left the bakery, the annoying bell ringing as she opened the door.

I sighed in relief when she was finally out the door. I had been working with Sandy for years and at first, we got along great. However, the more I got to know her, the more she began to annoy me. I still somewhat liked her, but I could only take her in small doses.

Sam arrived at the bakery within the next ten minutes. His hair was wet and slicked back like it always was after practice. He smelled of sandalwood with a hint of mint. I could even catch a scent of coconut as he breezed by me to grab his apron.

"Charlene wants me to start teaching you some baking," I said blandly as he walked back into the front area.

He nodded as he stood at the register, leaning against the counter as I continued to fill the shelves.

"We just have to keep an eye on the front," I told him, my voice still sounding slightly blocked and nasally from my cold.

"Are you sick?" Sam asked thoughtfully.

"Just a cold," I mumbled, closing the pastry case and setting down the tray I was holding.

"Should have gotten in the car," he replied, almost tauntingly. I just decided to ignore his response and change the subject.

"We're making blueberry muffins," I said, motioning for him to follow me back into the kitchen.

I heard Sam's footsteps follow me closely behind. Once we were in the kitchen, he leaned against the preparing table in the center of the room while I rummaged through shelves and cabinets to find the correct ingredients. After placing all purpose flour and sugar down on the table, I paused for a moment before letting out a strong sneeze that rattled my chest.

"Shit," I muttered quietly, holding a hand to my chest.

"You know, you wouldn't be sick if you just swallowed your pride and let me take you home," Sam said with a pointed look.

I threw a scowl his way. "Why would I get a ride from you? We aren't friends."

Sam rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. "I was trying to be friendly."

I stared at him with wide eyes. "Friendly? You're the one that wanted nothing to do with me."

Sam's glare matched mine as he turned to face me more directly. "Don't act like you wanted to be my friend. It's obvious you didn't considering what you said to Nathan."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked exasperatedly.

What I had said to Nathan? I couldn't think of anything I said to him that would cause Sam to think I didn't want anything to do with him.

"You know what you said," Sam nearly snarled.

"I really don't," I replied quickly, stepping closer to him. "What are you talking about?"

"You know he wrote it all over my car," he told me as if I would have a clue. I shook my head, signaling that I didn't know.

"Sam," I started, speaking softly. "What did he write on your car?"

Sam's gaze softened and his eyes became their usual warm shade of green that I was used to, the shade I liked to see.

"You really don't know," he observed thoughtfully.

I shook my head again.

"Unbelievable," Sam muttered, looking down at the ground.

"What happened?" I asked, standing beside him now, shoulder to shoulder.

Sam let out a deep breath. "Nathan and his friends wrote some stuff on my car calling me gay," he admitted. "He left me a note saying that he 'knew' that I had been flirting with you and that you told him how creepy and gross I am."

I was shocked at the revelation. The reason Sam had been so cold toward me lately was because Nathan had made up lies. My face was etched into a glare and I clenched my fists in anger. How could Nathan lie like that? How could he lie about me?

"Sam, I never said anything like that to him," I said, practically pleading. "I promise I didn't."

Sam nodded and looked over at me. "Yeah, I should've known."

A realization hit me and it caused even more anger to flood through me. Sam must have noticed because he gave me a concerned, yet questioning look.

"What?" he asked confusedly.

"Nathan lied so that you would stay away from me," I said, pulling the pieces together. "He wanted me to stay away from you but knew I wouldn't listen to him, so he made up some lie so that you would hate me," I explained further.

Nathan was used to getting what he wanted. I should've known he was capable of doing something like this without thinking of how it would affect

me.

"No offense, but your brother is a bastard," Sam concluded. I couldn't help but agree with him.

"Yeah, I know," I agreed.

The two of us stayed silent after that. I finished gathering the ingredients and showed Sam how to measure everything out. I let him pour the contents into the mixer and showed him how to used it. Once we were done mixing, we poured the batter into the tray and placed them in the oven. We stood in silence for a few more moments before Sam spoke up. It was then I realized he had been staring at me.

"I was so angry and embarrassed about what Nathan did," he admitted calmly, still staring into my eyes.

"That's understandable," I assured delicately.

He took a deep breath and looked down at the floor. "I think I was so offended because it was true."

My eyes widened and I stood up straighter from my leaning position. Sam shook his head before looking back up to me with his lips pinched together tightly.

"What do you mean?" I wondered, my voice shaking.

Was Sam admitting what I thought he was admitting?

"I mean," Sam started, clearing his throat, "I mean that I was flirting with you in the beginning."

Delight coursed through my veins at his words. It seemed as though all and any confusion I had about my feelings toward Sam were gone in that moment. I knew I was attracted to him. I would be lying if I said I didn't want him to be flirting with me. My heart was pounding as I waited for him to continue.

"I was into you," he admitted, staring directly into my eyes. "Still am."

I would never forget the vulnerable look on his face. His always intimidating sharp features seemed to soften as Sam opened up to me. He let his deep green eyes pierce me, waiting for a response.

I had no idea what to say, so I did the only thing I could think of.

I stepped closer to Sam so that we were merely an inch apart. We were so close I could feel his breath on my skin, giving me goosebumps. His chest was visibly rising and falling as if he was trying hard to control his breathing. I hesitantly reached my right hand up to stroke the back of his head, my fingers getting caught in his dark brown hair. Sam's breath hitched and he gave me the most alluring look I had ever seen. That was when I went for it.

My left hand met my right at the back of Sam's head and they worked together to pull him to me. I met Sam halfway and our lips connected, a feeling of pure ecstasy igniting in me. We were both hesitant at first, our lips barely moving with each other, but it didn't take long for Sam to take charge.

Sam brought his hands to caress my face as his mouth started moving faster, gripping onto my lips with his. I had never felt this amount of pleasure from just a kiss. Sam's lips were like candy and I couldn't get enough. Eventually, he moved his hands to my waist, gripping me so tightly I was starting to think I would have bruises in the shape of his finger prints.

Our lips lapped together sloppily, leaving our tongues in our respective mouths. It wasn't until Sam gripped me tighter and lifted me onto the table that I gasped and he slipped his tongue into my mouth. Sam lied me down on the table so that I was flat on my back as he hovered over me.

I moved my hands from Sam's hair, tugging on the bottom one last time. My hands found their way to his back and rested underneath his shirt, touching his warm skin. My legs hugged his hips, making sure there was no space between us.

Sam moved his lips from my mouth to my jaw. My eyes remained closed and my mouth hung open in pleasure as he brought his lips to my neck, sucking a tugging on my skin. I was in pure bliss until the bell at the front of the store rang, causing the two of us to spring apart.

We looked at each other breathlessly for a moment before Sam swallowed, took a deep breath, and walked out to the front of the store to greet the customer who had interrupted us. I lied breathless on the table, resting my head back and closing my eyes.

Pleasure still ripped through me like Sam had never left. My skin burned where his lips were just moments ago.

Whatever confusion I had about Sam was gone. He wasn't just handsome, he was *hot* . For some reason, someone like him found me attractive. I wasn't going to complain about that.

In that moment all I could think about was Sam and nothing else. I didn't let my mind linger to what this new found attraction meant about my sexuality. I definitely didn't think about Nathan and what he would do if he found out about this. Sam was all I could think about.

Just Sam.

**

Hi! I decided to post early because my only class today got cancelled so I had some time.

Thanks for all the votes and comments!

Please let me know what you think :)

11

Mason Maloney

You got me sick

That was the text I woke up to from Sam. I couldn't help but let an excited smile creep onto my face at the thought of why he was sick.

After the two of us were interrupted last night, I stayed in the kitchen while Sam tended to the customer. A few minutes later, he walked back into the kitchen, neither of us saying a word. It was awkward at first since we both didn't know where our relationship stood, but after a few moments Sam took two large strides to reach me and cupped my face with his hands before meeting my lips with his once again.

The two of us stood in the kitchen making out until the timer on the oven went off, letting us know the muffins were done baking. The rest of the night went like that mostly. We didn't talk much, just made out in the kitchen and every so often Sam would have to go greet a customer.

You got yourself sick

I texted back with a grin.

Sam texted back almost instantly.

It's not my fault you can't keep your hands off me... or your mouth

An uncharacteristic giggle escaped my mouth at his words. My hand came up to cover my mouth and I let out a breathy sigh before texting him back.

Oh yeah, my bad

I set my phone down on my nightstand before getting up from my bed and heading toward the bathroom. After getting ready for school, I headed

downstairs to see my parents, along with Nathan, sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast.

"Good morning," I greeted happily, grabbing some toast from the center of the table and sitting next to Nathan.

"Why are you so happy this early in the morning?" Dad asked confusedly, looking at me with squinted eyes.

I shrugged with a smile on my face, taking a bite of my toast. Nathan gave me a wary look as he chewed slowly on his own breakfast. The two of us finished eating breakfast quickly before bidding our parents and heading out to the car.

"You're driving today," Nathan said, tossing me the keys as he made his way to the passenger's seat.

I slid into the driver's seat beside him. "You can have the car after school, I'm hanging out with Ross."

"Dad wants us to switch more often," he told me, looking down at his phone.

I pulled out of the driveway and started making my way toward school. Even though I was extremely pissed at Nathan for what I found out last night about him lying, I decided I wouldn't confront him about it. It would be better for me if he thought that Sam and I were still not getting along. That way, he wouldn't try and do anything else to pull us apart.

"Well, you can have it today," I answered, looking over at him briefly.

Nathan didn't say anything as he plugged his phone into the aux cord and started playing some obnoxious rap song. I gave him an irritated look before turning the volume down a few notches.

Nathan scoffed, shaking his head. "You have no taste."

"I just don't want to go deaf," I retorted.

Soon enough, I parked the car at school. Nathan immediately got out of the car, ripping the aux cord from his phone. I quickly got up to him and shoved the keys into his hand, looking up at him. Nathan was bigger than me. Funny enough, he was about the same size as Sam. The two of them might have hated each other, but they were more alike than they realized.

"Seriously, take the car today," I said to him.

He looked down at me, gripping the keys. "Fine, but I'm not getting cussed out by Dad."

I rolled my eyes. "I'll let him know that I gave you the keys."

I was about to walk away but Nathan grabbed my arm, pulling me back to him.

"Can you bring home some muffins from work tomorrow?" he pleaded with wide eyes. "I've been craving them."

"I guess," I replied, giving him a strange look.

"Thank you, love you, bye," Nathan said quickly before releasing me and walking off to find his friends.

***

The wind breezed through my hair as I ran down the dirt path, following Ross. My feet crunched down on the fallen leaves with every step I took. It was perfect weather for a run. It was cool and breezy with a clear blue sky.

Though I hated to admit it, Ross was right about it being better to run on the path rather than the track. The run was more enjoyable when I wasn't running around in circles with nothing to look at. The trail was curvy, but relatively flat so we wouldn't trip. It was nice to be able to look around at everything around us, the orange and red of the leaves standing out.

I was running out of breath quickly, still not being used to running this much. Ross could hear my ragged breaths and slowed down to a stop before turning around to face me.

"Need a break?" he asked, taking a sip of his water.

I nodded, taking a sip of mine. My breaths were shallow as I huffed and puffed tirelessly.

"You've been doing good," Ross complimented. "We've gone over half a mile."

"We have?" I asked in a breathy tone, surprised we had already run that far.

Ross nodded, pushing his hair back from his face.

"You're still kind of slow, but at least you haven't taken any breaks," Ross pointed out.

I would usually slow down to take a break once or twice a lap. Some of my breaks I even stopped completely.

I took a moment to observe Ross. His shaggy brown hair was being blown upward by the breeze, showcasing his round face that held a bit of stubble on his chin. The sparkle of his bright blue eyes was striking and captivating. His body was lean, truly showing the only exercise he did was running. Throughout my observations I couldn't find myself being attracted to him. This just seemed to confuse me about my sexuality.

What was it about Sam that pulled me in? Was it just because he was so extremely attractive that anyone, regardless of what gender you like, could admit he was good looking? Did I like guys or did I just like Sam?

"Ready to head back?" Ross asked, slapping my shoulder.

I hummed in agreement and he took off ahead of me. I slowly but surely caught up to him, even though I knew he wasn't running at his full speed.

My breaths ripped through me when the two of us got back to Ross's house. As soon as his house was in sight, I slowed down to a walk and put my hands on my hips. Ross turned around to face me, looking completely fine while I was dying.

"You're getting better," Ross praised as he waited for me at the back door of his house.

I heaved out a deep breath and waved him off as I walked by him to get inside. I immediately went to his kitchen to get myself some more water. The water instantly cooled my body and I was able to breathe better. Ross followed my lead and got himself a glass.

"Want to go watch a movie?" Ross asked, putting his glass in the dishwasher.

I nodded, finishing off my glass and handing it to him. We made our way to the living room and I threw myself down on the couch while Ross picked up the remote from the table before sitting down beside me.

While Ross set up the TV for our movie, I pulled out my cellphone from my pocket. My phone was lit up with a text message from Sam. I angled my phone so Ross wouldn't see and looked to him to make sure he wasn't paying attention to me. I didn't know why I was so against Ross knowing that I was texting Sam. It could have been just because I liked having my own secret, but it could also be because I was unsure of how he would react. Once I was sure it was safe, checked the text.

Coach sent me home early so I wouldn't get the others sick

Are you still not feeling well?

I'm fine... you should come over

I blushed at his words and glanced up at Ross to see that his eyes were still fixated on the TV.

Can't I'm with Ross

I anxiously waited for his reply. What I was anxious about, I didn't know.

Some other time then

Some other time. Definitely.

***

A smirk took up Sam's whole face when he walked into the bakery the next day for work. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye while I was with a customer. His eyes traveled up and down my body as he passed me to go to the kitchen.

"Have a good day, ma'am," I said to the customer before she grabbed her bag off the counter and left.

As soon as the customer left the store, I turned around to head to the kitchen, bumping straight into Sam as I did. My face smacked his toned chest and I instantly breathed in his scent of sandalwood and coconut. I looked up at him, a sheepish smile finding its way on my face.

"Can't resist me?" Sam teased with a smirk, looking down at me.

I playfully shoved his chest. "Something like that."

I backed away from him slightly and took in his appearance. His wet, slicked back hair started drying on the ends. He had the sleeves of his long-sleeved shirt pushed up to his elbows, showing off his forearms. I had never found that look sexy until I saw it on him.

The amused gleam in his eyes told me that he had caught me checking him out. I looked away for a moment, his voice pulling my face back to look at him.

"By the way, I got Sandy to cover my shift Saturday," Sam told me with a lazy smile, leaning against the pastry case.

"You did?" I asked, surprised with widened eyes.

Sam nodded casually. "I had to bribe her, but she's gonna do it."

I gave him a questioning look. "Bribe her?"

A sheepish smile formed on his face as he scratched the back of his neck nervously.

"I just have to buy her dinner," he admitted.

"So you're taking her out on a date?" I wondered in an accusatory tone with raised eyebrows.

Sam's smile turned into a smirk. "You sound jealous."

"You wish," I lied, walked by him to get to the kitchen as he took his spot at the register.

The shelves in the back were filled with baked goods that Charlene made earlier in the day. I chose a tray of donuts to take out to the front, putting on plastic gloves before taking the tray and leaving the kitchen.

Sam glanced over to me as a customer stood in front of him when I walked out to the front. I hadn't even noticed the customer leave when Sam came to stand behind me. He grabbed my sides, startling me and nearly causing me to drop the tray I was holding. I smacked his hand away to which he just snorted out laughter before stepping away from me.

I turned to look at him for a moment. I had hoped he would be looking back, but he was back at the register, looking out the window with a bored expression on his face. My expression fell in disappointment slightly before I turned back to the pastry case.

While the feelings I had for Sam were nothing serious, they still had me questioning my sexuality. However, I didn't think he felt the same way. Sam always seemed like he was so sure of himself. It wouldn't surprise me if he knew exactly who he was while I still had no clue.

The bell in the front of the store pulled me out of my thoughts. I turned slightly to see that Christo and another one of Sam's friends was waltzing into the bakery dressed in Knight's Football t-shirts. Christo leaned forward against the counter, squinting his eyes at the different baked goods and pastries we had.

"Just pick something Christo!" the other boy exclaimed, crossing his arms in annoyance.

I heard Sam's contagious laugh ring out as Christo still stared silently at all of his choices.

"Chill, Jake," Sam laughed out.

"I don't know how you work here man," Jake told Sam. "Being in Warrior territory could be bad for you."

I rolled my eyes as I placed the last doughnut into the case.

"It's not so bad," I heard Sam say before I went into the kitchen, placing the empty tray back on its shelf.

When I went back to the front of the store, I noticed Sam and his friends were whispering. Jake noticed me and not so subtly told his two friends to stop talking. He glared at me as he looked me up and down. My face mirrored his until he eventually looked away, his eyes resting on Sam.

All of a sudden the bakery that was pretty much my second home felt cold and unwelcoming, two feelings I had felt with Sam not that long ago.

Sam had put an invisible wall up between the two of us when his friends walked in. Maybe he wasn't as sure of himself as I thought him to be.

***

I handed Nathan a bag filled with muffins wordlessly when I got in the car after work. I was physically and mentally exhausted from today, ready to get in bed.

After Sam's friends had left the bakery, the two of us barely spoke. Earlier today I longed to kiss him again, but that wasn't even close to happening. It was like when they walked in, Sam became different and closed off with me.

"Long day?" Nathan asked when he saw me leaning my head against the window.

I just nodded, not wanting to speak. Although I didn't want to confront Nathan about the lies he told Sam, I was still angry with him for doing it. I didn't want to speak to him, I just wanted silence.

The rest of the car ride was silent apart from the awful rap station Nathan had on, the pounding bass causing my head to throb.

To say I was discouraged after my interactions with Sam today would be an understatement. Though I never really started understanding the way I felt about him, this caused a halt in any progress that I made. Maybe I just liked the way he looked and that was it. There was also the possibility that he was just messing with me to get to Nathan, though I hated to admit it since my brother had already accused Sam of that.

Whatever it was, I was going to figure it out and I wouldn't let Sam play me along the way.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for all of the votes and comments. I really appreciate it. :) Please keep the comments coming! I love to read them and I try to reply!

What has been your favorite part of the story so far?

12

Mason Maloney

Saturday morning at the bakery was busy. Luckily, Sam had arranged for Sandy to take his shift even though she would also be working in the afternoon. I didn't understand why she would work a double shift in exchange for some lousy dinner, but I didn't ask. Soon enough my shift was over and I was able to leave Sandy and her constant bragging about her date with Sam.

I lied on my bed, holding *Pride and Prejudice* above my head, completely immersed in the novel. I had already read it plenty of times, but I still couldn't get enough of it. I was so taken my the book that I didn't even realize someone had come into my room unannounced.

"Mason, get up," Bella demanded, ripping the book from my grasp and tossing it aside on the floor.

"What do you want?" I asked her, realizing Pete and Ross had walked in behind her.

"We're going out," she answered blandly.

"Where?" I asked, looking over at Ross. He just shrugged.

"We haven't thought that far ahead," Pete said with a solemn expression.

I heaved myself off of my bed, grabbing my book and placing it neatly on my bedside table. I stretched my arms high above my head, causing my taut back to crack refreshingly. I nodded toward the door and led my friends out of my room and down the stairs. Once we were outside, we made our way into Ross's car where Pete took the front seat.

"We should go to the mall," Bella suggested. "I need clothes."

"No," was Pete's instant reply. "I can barely tolerate you when you aren't shopping, it's worse when you are."

Bella instantly scowled at his words and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm going to have to agree with Pete," Ross said with a tight-lipped smile. "We aren't going to the mall."

Bella looked to as to get my opinion. I just shrugged, not wanting to get into it with her. Ever since I had found out about her and Sam, it was hard for me to interact with her. Nothing felt the same and it was even worse now that something had gone on with Sam and me. It almost felt like we were in some type of love triangle that she knew nothing about. Though, I knew that wasn't the case. Whatever it was between Sam and me was just based on physical attraction. I doubted he even wanted to do anything more with me than we had already done.

"We can go to the trampoline park," Pete suggested. "I need to get some energy out."

"You always need to get energy out," Bella retorted, rolling her eyes.

Without much more discussion, we decided to go along with Pete's suggestion. He was more than happy that we agreed and started doing a little dance in his seat, swaying side to side. I just laughed at my friend and shook my head fondly.

The park wasn't too far out of town and we were there in no time. Pete excitedly exited the car, barely waiting for Ross to park it.

"Pete!" Ross exclaimed in a chastising tone. "We talked about that! Do *not* open the door when the car is moving."

Pete just waved him off as he continued walking toward the building, the rest of us following him. Ross scoffed and sped up to reach him, slapping a hand on his shoulder when he did. I tried speeding up too so that I wouldn't have to be alone with Bella, but she decided to spark up a conversation with me.

"You would have rather gone shopping, right?" she asked with a light smile.

"Sure," I told her calmly, happy that she kept the conversation light. "Whatever you say."

Bella giggled and shoved my shoulder, causing me to stumble slightly. "Don't be a jerk like Pete."

I held my hands up in front of me in mock surrender. "Alright, alright."

The two of us eventually caught up to Pete and Ross who were already inside buying tickets.

"We're doing dodge-ball dudes, be ready," Pete announced with a teasing smirk on his face.

Bella raised her eyebrows. "You're going down, Pete."

While the two of them argued about who was the better dodge-ball player, I stepped ahead of them to buy my own ticket and then stood off to the side with Ross. The two of us stood side by side, watching Bella and Pete argue.

"Should we force them onto the same team?" Ross joked, nudging my shoulder.

I let out a laugh which caught the other two's attention. I shook my head, looking over at Ross for a moment before motioning them to follow me toward the trampolines. Since we were doing dodge-ball, we had to wait for a new game to start so we took our shoes off and put on the socks given to us before heading toward the side trampolines to warm up.

Pete instantly started jumping and doing flips as soon as his feet hit the trampoline. He wasn't kidding when he said he needed to let out some energy. Ross started jumping with Pete and the two of them began to shove each other around while Bella and I jumped lightly on the sides, staying away from them.

Bella rolled her eyes as she watched our two friends wrestle each other. "They're like twelve years old."

I let out a laugh and nodded along in agreement. "Pete definitely brings that out in Ross."

Bella hummed in agreement and grabbed my hand, pulling me along as we jumped around, steering clear of our two friends.

Eventually we were able to get in on a dodge-ball game, much to Pete's delight. Ross and Pete joined one team while Bella and I joined another. When the game started, Pete immediately whipped the ball over at us, trying to hit Bella. She let out a shriek as she jumped away from the ball before picking it up and lobbing it back onto Pete's side.

"Not so hard, Peter!" Bella chastised with her hands on her hips.

He looked slightly apologetic but still had a playful gleam in his eye as he threw the ball over at Bella, softer this time. She picked up a ball that rolled by her feet and handed it to me. I spotted Ross who was bending down to pick up a ball and threw mine directly at him. The ball smacked him in the head as he stood up, causing him to stagger backwards. He scowled and pointed at me.

"That doesn't count, it was a head shot!" Ross yelled, throwing his ball at me. I easily dodged it with a sardonic smirk.

I was so busy looking at Ross, I hadn't seen Pete aim at me. It was too late by the time I noticed the ball hurdling toward me speedily. I tried to move out of the way, but I wasn't fast enough as the ball grazed my shoulder. I groaned in defeat, throwing my head back.

Pete got down on his knees, shaking his hands uncontrollably as he cheered triumphantly. I shook my head in defeat and plopped down on the side, watching the rest of the game.

***

"Can I have a bite of that?" Pete asked, peering over my shoulder to look into my cup of frozen yogurt.

After leaving the trampoline park, Bella suggested that we got out for frozen yogurt. Pete quickly agreed and we were on our way. Pete had tried to get Bella and me to pay since him and Ross had won at dodge-ball, but he quickly shut up when Bella gave him a look that could kill. I sighed before handing Pete my cup so that he could taste my frozen yogurt.

"Just feed it to me," he said, opening his mouth expectantly. I glared at him but complied anyway, taking some yogurt on my spoon and shoving it into his mouth.

"That's good," he told me with his mouth still filled. "What flavor is that?"

"Strawberry cheesecake," I answered blandly, taking a bite for myself. Pete hummed happily before going back to his own food.

"We should go out like this more often," Bella spoke up, placing her cup down on the table. I nodded in agreement along with Ross.

"We should do a movie night tonight, but with a theme," Pete answered excitedly.

"What would the theme be?" Bella asked.

"Like a certain genre," Pete replied.

"Horror," I suggested and Pete automatically nodded along.

"Yes!" he agreed excitedly.

"No!" Bella protested. "I hate scary movies!"

"You're out-voted three to one," Ross pointed out to which Bella just crossed her arms and huffed.

"It'll be your faults if I have nightmares," she said, placing blame on us. Pete rolled his eyes.

"You'll be fine," he started. "Don't be such a baby."

Bella glared at him before picking up her spoon and flicking some of her yogurt at him, hitting his face dead on.

"You're lucky I'm a nice guy," he said, the yogurt dripping down his face.

"You are?" she replied mockingly. Before he could throw any of his food at her, I took his cup away from him and shielded it from is grasp.

"Not in public, please," I pleaded, giving them each a stern look.

"I'm just saying since we didn't do what I wanted to do today, I should get to pick the movie genre," Bella argued persuasively, trying to make herself look innocent so we would agree.

Pete pouted, crossing his arms. "Fine."

Bella let out an excited shriek and clapped her hands together, blowing Pete a mocking kiss.

"She's going to pick chick flicks," Ross told him with raised eyebrows.

Pete groaned. "I know!"

"Let's be honest," I started. "She would have been screaming through the whole movie if we watched horror."

"You're damn right!" Bella agreed with a laugh. "And you guys have a soft spot for rom-coms, don't even act like you don't."

She was right, but I wouldn't admit that out loud and neither would Ross or Pete.

While conversation continued about whether or not Pete enjoyed a good romantic comedy, I pulled my phone from my pocket to check it. There was nothing. I sighed in disappointment. For some reason, I had expected Sam to text me today. Even though nothing else had happened between us since our first few kisses, I was hoping he would get in touch with me today. The two of us hadn't talked about much since our make out sessions. Sam was

still arrogant and flirty while I felt like I was tripping over words with him, but nothing we said lately had any value.

After checking my phone at least five more times and receiving nothing, the four of us left the frozen yogurt shop and headed to Bella's house where she had all of her movies. She spoke happily about the movies she wanted to watch, but I paid her no mind as I stared out the window, watching as we drove by the colorful trees.

Bella excitedly leaped out of the car when Ross parked it outside of her house. The three of us followed her sullenly as we knew we would have to endure at least three hours of romance movies picked out by Bella.

We settled in her living room once we were inside while Bella was presumably up in her room gathering movies. I checked my phone once again, but there was still no text from Sam.

"Okay!" Bella said, clapping her hands together and grabbing our attention as she descended the stairs.

"What are you making us watch?" Pete asked, spreading out on the couch where Bella sat beside him.

She looked at him excitedly before holding up two movie cases. "We are watching *Love, Simon* and *Bridesmaids* !"

Bella's smile was so wide it took up her whole face while Pete, Ross, and I gave her blank stares. Pete grabbed one of the movie cases and examined the front and back of it. After looking at the case, he glanced up at Bella with a raised eyebrow.

"You're making us watch a gay movie?" he asked slowly.

My breath hitched in my throat and I felt as if the room had grown hotter within the last few seconds. I looked to see the reactions of my friends, but none of them seemed to notice my sudden tense posture.

"It's a good movie," Bella defended, getting up to put it in the DVD player. "You'll like it."

"Not that I have anything against gay people," Pete started and I almost rolled my eyes. "But why would we want to watch this when none of us are gay?"

While I was still questioning my own sexuality, I found myself tensing even more at his words. It was like I had some dirty little secret that I was ashamed to tell my friends. I guess I did. It wasn't like I necessarily wanted them to know that I made out with Sam.

Ross scoffed and crossed his arms, leaning back into his chair. "Watching a gay movie won't make you gay, Pete. Get over it."

I silently praised Ross and let myself loosen up.

"Thank you!" Bella said appreciatively, sitting back down next to Pete as the movie started playing.

In the opening scenes of the movie, Bella excitedly squirmed in her seat and even let out a squeal when the main character was on the screen.

"Nick Robinson is so cute!" she exclaimed happily, not taking her eyes off the screen.

Pete have her a deadpanned look. "He's gay."

Bella smacked his shoulder. "His character is gay, he's not."

"Even if he was gay, she could still find him attractive, asshole," I added argumentatively, yet still feeling nervous as I said it.

Ross nodded along in agreement while Pete held his hands up in surrender.

"I'm just saying!" he said loudly. "Stop making me out to be some homophobic asshole."

"Then stop acting like one!" Ross replied quickly, reclining further in his chair.

I chuckled quietly at Ross's response while Pete just shook his head, clearly annoyed. I found myself quite enthralled with the movie as it went on. Part of me related to Simon in a way and the other part envied him. At least he knew who he was and how he identified. I still had no clue.

I checked my phone again, but it was still left void of any messages. It took all of my shriveling confidence to find it in me to text first. I angled my phone away from my friends so that I would be the only one who could see my screen. After typing out my message, I let my thumb hover over the send button as if debating whether I should actually go through with this. It wasn't actually a big deal, but since it was Sam it felt like it was.

Hey.

The message sent.

I ended the night without a response.

**

Thanks for the votes and comments! Please keep them coming. I love hearing from you :)

What do you think about Mason's friends?

13

Mason Maloney

I was never one to worry too much about what others thought of me. It wasn't that I was extremely confident like my brother, but more like I just didn't think about it. Something had changed in me recently and suddenly I felt like I was being suffocated with insecurity. It might have started when I started getting to know Sam, but I couldn't be too sure. The uncertainty I felt around him made me feel so out of control and I worried what he thought about my every move. I worried that my attraction to him was one sided, even though it didn't seem that way at first.

Sam never replied to my message. I checked my phone the rest of the weekend like a fool and was left unsatisfied. When he came into work on Monday afternoon, I didn't know how to act around him. What we had shared together didn't seem to matter and I feared that if I brought it up, I would seem desperate.

"What are you thinking about?" Sam pulled me from my thoughts, causing me to face him as the two of us leaned against the counter.

"Nothing," I lied.

Sam had a thoughtful expression on his face. "You looked like you were lost in thought."

I shrugged, not knowing what else to say. I didn't want to delve into my thoughts with him, especially when they were about him.

"Anyway," Sam started, clearing his throat. "I was thinking we could hang out this weekend."

What he said caused me to perk up and I was sure he noticed it by the way my posture straightened and how my once sullen expression lifted exceptionally.

"Sure," I answered casually, nodding slowly.

The thought of being alone with Sam was thrilling, yet daunting. It felt as though we were breaking a law and I suppose we kind of were. The thought was exhilarating and nerve-wracking at the same time. Being around Sam caused my nerves to flare, but the added threat of getting caught together was almost overbearing.

"At my place," he trailed. "Alone."

Sam walked closer to me with a teasing smirk on his face. His right hand came in contact with my hip, squeezing it lightly. I gulped at our close proximity as his thumb found its way under my shirt and brushed back and forth on my bare skin.

"Sounds good," I muttered quietly, trying to keep my composure. It was like he knew exactly what he did to me and he was using it to his advantage.

I wished I had the confidence to give him a taste of his own medicine, but when I had no idea where we stood as friends, or more, I couldn't even bare the thought of making a move.

Sam chuckled lightly at my obvious discomfort and removed his hand from my skin, continuing to stand close to me. It felt like I couldn't breathe, yet I still didn't want him to move away from me. We stayed silent for a few moments, looking at each other with blank expressions. I wanted to look away but it was like Sam had paralyzed me and I couldn't look anywhere but him.

"We should start closing up," Sam suddenly said, backing away from me.

I cleared my throat and nodded in agreement, turning my head away from him to hide my flushed skin. Sam walked by me to go count the register while I went out to the front of the store to start putting the chairs on top of the tables.

Sam joined me soon after he finished with the register. He brought out a broom and started sweeping where I had already picked up the chairs. The

only sounds that filled the air were the light bang of the chairs as I placed them on the tables and the wispy noise as Sam dragged the broom on the floor. He started to let out a hum which caused me to look over at him.

"What?" he asked when he noticed me looking.

"Nothing," I said quickly with a shrug, turning away from him.

He started humming the tune again, louder this time. I didn't recognize it so I turned to face him again, this time with a confused expression.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he wondered, holding the broom up straight and leaning on it.

"What the hell are you humming?" I asked, finding my voice. I had been so quiet with him today, but I was starting to feel more like myself.

Sam stared at me with wide eyes, his mouth agape. "You don't know that song?"

I shrugged. "No."

His expression didn't falter. "Mr. Brightside? The Killers?"

I shrugged again, this time with a small, close-lipped smile. Sam shook his head at me and took his phone out of his pocket, muttering something under his breath about me being "unbelievable."

The song started playing and I realized that I vaguely remember hearing it through the walls of my room, coming from Nathan's loud, obnoxious speakers. But I wouldn't mention that to Sam because I knew it would only sour the mood.

"Maybe I have heard it," I admitted.

"I need to school you on music," Sam said seriously. "What do you even listen to? Pop?"

I nodded and Sam let out a groan, causing me to laugh at him.

"Pop music isn't bad, don't be an ass," I said with a wide smile.

" *Some* of it isn't bad," he corrected, pointing a finger at me.

I rolled my eyes. "That could be said about any genre."

"That could be said about any genre," Sam mimicked me in a mocking tone.

I chuckled and shook my head at him, leaning back against a table. "You're a child."

"At least I have taste," he countered with a scoff and continued sweeping the floor.

I pushed myself away from the table and walked over to him. Sam stopped what he was doing when he saw me standing in front of him. He raised his eyebrows in question.

"I have an idea," I told him. He tilted his head slightly as if telling me to go on. "How about I make a playlist of songs that I like for you to listen to and you make one for me."

Sam pondered on my suggestion for a moment before nodding slowly.

"Sure," he said with a smirk. "Just don't put anything too awful on there."

I couldn't help but shove him in the shoulder in response to his words, causing him to laugh loudly at me. This was the best time to be around Sam, when the two of us felt at ease and comfortable with each other.

Sam started sweeping again and I couldn't keep myself from watching as he mouthed along to the words and swayed slightly to the music that he had playing. He was definitely a sight for sore eyes.

I didn't want to take my eyes off of him.

***

I shivered as I sat on the cold bleachers. It was an unusually cold night for late September in Massachusetts. This was the type of weather that was to be expected in November. I hugged my jacket closer to my body, trying to keep warm.

"I'm freezing my balls off, man," Pete said with chattering teeth, pulling his hood over his head.

I let out a deep breath, causing a cloud of air to form in front of me briefly. My leg bounced up and down, unable to stay still as my body desperately wanted to warm up. Much to my delight, I spotted Bella and Ross ascending the bleachers with cups of hot cocoa in their hands. Pete rejoiced loudly when his eyes fell on them.

"Life savers!" he shouted as our two friends reached us, handing each of us a cup.

My hands instantly burned as I held onto the cup, but I was so cold at that moment that I didn't care. I blew on the steaming beverage before taking a small sip, my tongue immediately blistering at the contact. As the cocoa moved down my throat, my body warmed up in delight.

"I can't believe how cold it is," Bella said as she sat beside me.

Bella had a winter hat sitting atop of her head along with her cozy North-face jacket hugging her tightly while I sat there with a light jacket over my sweatshirt.

"I'm going to freeze to death," I answered her, grabbing my hood and putting it on my head.

"Should've dressed warmer," she retorted sardonically with a knowing smile.

As Bella turned to make conversation with Pete and Ross, I took out my phone and started a message to Sam.

Good luck at your game tonight

Maybe I should have felt guilty for wishing my brother's enemy luck, but I didn't. If I was going to have any sort of relationship with Sam, even just a friendship, then supporting him was something I had to do despite what my brother wanted. There was no reason why I couldn't support both of them simultaneously.

Sam responded quickly.

Thank you. I'll talk to you later.

I smiled at the text before slipping my phone back into my pocket.

The game wasn't going to be starting for another twenty minutes, but it was crucial to get there early enough to find seating for all four of us together. Our town loved football, so the bleachers filled up for every game. Most people have become accustomed to bringing their own chairs and sitting down on the grass.

"Are you in, Mason?" Bella asked, bringing me back from my thoughts.

"What?" I asked confusedly.

She rolled her eyes. "A bunch of people are going to The Orchard tonight for hot cider, you in?" Bella explained.

The Orchard was a neat little restaurant that was on an apple orchard. In the fall, the restaurant had a bunch of apple and pumpkin themed foods and drinks and in October they had a corn maze. It was a favorite for everyone around and it was a few towns over.

"Sure," I answered with a shrug.

Bella turned away from me after hearing my answer and continued her conversation with Ross and Pete. I looked down at the field to see the football players warming up. I instantly found my brother and watched as he threw the ball to Tony, completing the pass perfectly. He looked as calm and cool as ever, superior confidence oozing off of him.

It was obvious that my brother's talent caused nerves to flare in other teams. He knew the game so well and could see through any mistake the other team was making and use it to his advantage. It was part of what made our team so good, not that he was the only part. One of the only teams he didn't shake was the Knights. The Knights and the Warriors were so evenly matched with talent, it was no wonder why they hated each other. They were always each other's hardest game.

I always thought that part of the reason why Nathan hated Sam so much was because Sam was just as good as him at football. Nathan was used to being better than the other team's quarterback because he put in the work, but so did Sam.

I continued to absentmindedly watch Nathan throw the ball, just waiting for the game to finally begin.

***

The Orchard was buzzing with excitement as nearly half of the student body was there celebrating the win. It was warm inside considering the amount of people that were crowded around providing their body heat. We were sat a small table against the wall with a few of Bella's other friends, sipping on hot apple cider and eating desserts.

Bella's friend, Wendy, sat beside me, inching closer to me every so often. She was a nice girl and obviously shy, but she was making it quite evident that she was trying to get my attention. I didn't know what to do about that, so I just contributed to conversation and tried not to make her think that her feelings were reciprocated.

"I'm about to start eating this last piece of pie if no one else claims it," Pete warned with his eyebrows raised, pointing his fork toward the last remaining piece of pie.

"No!" Bella shouted, knocking his fork away with her own. "We all agreed to share it!"

"That's not a big enough piece for seven of us to share, Bella!" he responded, looking at Bella as if she was crazy.

"I won't have any," I interjected, gesturing toward the pie.

They each spared me a glance before going back to glare at each other. I couldn't help but roll my eyes. They were too much sometimes, fighting about the stupidest things.

"I won't either," Ross added, pushing his empty plate toward the center of the table.

Wendy giggled, brushing her hand on my shoulder, as Bella and Pete bickered.

"Are they always like this?" she asked me with a laugh.

I nodded with a blank expression. "Always."

Wendy let out another laugh, her hand still on me. "They fight like an old married couple."

I pulled my lips together tightly before replying. "That they do."

I moved slightly to my right to pull my phone out of my pocket, causing Wendy to drop her hand from me. Earlier in the night, I had felt my phone buzz, but I hadn't had a chance to check it. I knew before even looking at it that it would be from Sam.

Hey

His text was simple, yet I still found myself extremely excited about it.

Hey, how did your game go?

He only took a few moments to respond.

Good. We won

I smiled with a closed mouth as I typed my reply.

Awesome. Congrats

His reply was instant with two rapid texts.

Thanks

Want to come over?

I frowned before looking up at my friends. None of them looked like they were ready to leave anytime soon, but I didn't want to deny Sam's offer. This would be the second time I rejected him and I didn't know if he was interested enough to ask me again.

Aren't you out celebrating your win?

Wasn't feeling it, I'm home alone.

Although they didn't look like it, his words were an invitation. He was alone, meaning *we* would be alone.

I'm at The Orchard right now.

I can pick you up.

I looked around the room and spotted Nathan. He sat with his friends, a pretty cheerleader perched on his lap. Surely he wouldn't notice if I left, but what about my friends? I would have to make up a believable excuse.

Okay.

I'll be there in ten minutes

"Damn, I have to get going," I announced, causing my friends to look at me.

"Why?" Bella asked, giving me a strange look.

"Yeah, we're your only friends," Pete added, causing me to glare at him.

"Charlene is behind on an order she needs to bake for tomorrow, she called Sam and he's going to come get me so we can help," I explained my lie. Hopefully that was believable enough.

"Sam Knight?" Wendy asked incredulously.

I ignored her.

"You better not let Nathan see you going off with Sam," Ross said in a warning tone.

"Cover for me," I said, looking over at Nathan who was still preoccupied. "I don't think he'll notice."

Bella looked as if she wanted to say something, but didn't. I could only imagine what she wanted to say. Surely, it was about Sam and I was glad she held her tongue. I did not want to talk about him with her ever again.

I'm here

As soon as I got the text, I stood up and announced that I would be leaving. I gave one last glance to Nathan to be sure he wouldn't see me leave before I briskly walked out of the small restaurant. Sam was pulled up near the door and I quickly slid myself into his passenger's seat.

"Hey," he greeted with a smile, putting the car in drive and taking off.

"Hey," I replied breathlessly, pulling my seat-belt on.

At that moment, I began to grow nervous thinking about what the two of us would do at his house. Alone. I knew I wasn't ready to go too far, but what exactly was too far for me?

"You're being quiet," Sam pointed out, glancing at me briefly.

"Just thinking," I answered quietly. I didn't want to admit to him what I was thinking about. It would feel awkward if he knew what I was thinking, especially if he was expecting something from me.

"You get lost in your head a lot," he noted.

"Sorry," I mumbled in response.

"It's not a bad thing," he quickly added. "Just something I noticed."

Soon enough we were pulling into Sam's driveway. His house was a decent size and an all around normal looking space. It was exactly something you would expect someone like him would be living in. The house wasn't too big, nor was it small. The lawn seemed to be well-kept along with the flower bed in front. The whole area seemed to lack any flaws, kind of like Sam.

I was lost in my head again, as Sam would say, since I didn't even notice him get out of the car. He stood at the passenger's door and yanked it open, looking down at me as if he was deep in thought.

"Are you okay?" he asked, moving aside so I could get out of the car.

I let out a breath. "I'm fine."

Sam didn't seem to believe me, but he let it go for now. I flinched in surprise when his hand grabbed hold of mine, his thumb rubbing my skin comfortingly. His touch was able to calm my ever growing nerves. I smiled down at our hands and then back up at him to see that he was already looking at me. The two of us seemed to have a silent conversation, as if asking the other if they were okay with what was happening. When neither of us pulled away, Sam took that as a sign to go for it.

His hand gripped mine tighter and he lead me ever so slowly into his home.

**

Thanks for reading! Let me know what you think :)

14

Mason Maloney

I looked around Sam's living room as I waited for him to come back from the kitchen with drinks. The couch I was sitting on was soft and looked fairly new. There was a giant flat-screen TV hanging on the wall in front of the couch, complete with surround sound speakers. It seemed as though Sam's family was pretty well-off.

Footsteps from behind me caused me to look over my shoulder at Sam. He walked into the living room holding two glasses of water before setting them down on coasters on the coffee table. Sam sat down beside me, our thighs touching, and grabbed the TV remote to turn it on. He immediately changed the station to a sports channel that was talking about the highlights of the Thursday night NFL game.

I turned my gaze to Sam, who looked calm and cool, while I was swimming in nerves at our close proximity. Sam leaned back in his seat and threw his arm on the back of the couch behind me, leaning slightly closer to me. I didn't know whether I should lean into him, so I stayed put.

"Do you watch football?" Sam asked suddenly, his gaze still set on the TV.

I cleared my throat, afraid I wouldn't find my voice if I didn't. "Just the Patriots."

Sam hummed with a nod as he turned away from the TV to look at me. He seemed to be studying my face and while I wanted to look away so I wouldn't feel scrutinized, I didn't.

"Are you okay with being here?" Sam asked thoughtfully.

I pondered on his question for a moment. Of course, I was okay with being here. I just wasn't okay with how uneasy I felt and that was my own fault, not his.

"I wouldn't have come if I wasn't okay with it," I answered with a knowing look.

"So you're okay with this?" Sam put his arm around me, pulling me closer to his side.

Instead of feeling more nervous about the situation, I felt lighter. When Sam showed me affection, I wasn't afraid to show it back. What frightened me was making the first move when I wasn't sure what he wanted.

I smirked, resting my head on his shoulder. "I'm okay with this."

We sat like that for a while, Sam's arm draped over me to keep us close. Sam eventually shut the TV off when his program was over. The two of us sat in the darkness of his living room, the only light coming from the street lights that could be seen through the windows. I looked up at Sam to see that he as already looking down at me with an inviting gaze. He slipped his hand under my chin, pulling my face up to meet his in a brief kiss.

My eyes were still closed when Sam pulled away from the kiss, as if I was savoring the memory of it. I opened my eyes when I felt Sam pull away from me, standing up from the couch and holding his hand out for me to take. Of course, I took it without hesitation.

He easily maneuvered through his house in the dark, dragging me to the stairs while I clumsily followed him. We soon reached the stairs and I noticed as we ascended them that none of them creaked under our weight. Once we were at the top, Sam led me to a room at the end of the hallway.

The two of us entered Sam's room and I instantly began to look around. The walls were white and bare while the dark carpet on the floor was clear of any mess. A queen sized bed was positioned in the center of the room with dark blue bedding situated on top. It surprised me that his bed was made and his room looked neat and organized. It wasn't something you would expect from a teenage male.

Sam didn't say anything as he shut the door and pushed me against it, trapping me with his arms on either side of my head. He brought his lips

down on mine roughly and I immediately responded to the kiss. He didn't wait long before bringing his tongue into my mouth and deepening the kiss. What I had learned from the first time I made out with Sam was that he was a *really* good kisser.

A quiet moan left my lips as Sam's hands sneaked their way under my shirt, running over my stomach and the waistband of my jeans. My hands slithered up into Sam's hair, tugging on the strands with my fingers and pulling him closer to me. Sam groaned at the feeling and kissed me harder, putting his fingers through my belt loops and roughly pulling my hips closer to his, our groins touching. The sensation caused me to tilt my head back in pleasure, my lips parting.

Sam took that opportunity to start kissing down my neck with one hand resting on the side of my neck and the other on my hip, rubbing circles with his thumb under my shirt. He moved the neckline of my shirt to the side as his mouth moved down to kiss my collarbone. I gasped as I felt his teeth graze my skin and pulled his head away from me.

He looked startled at my sudden action, but I paid that no mind as I started to kiss his jaw, returning the favor. Sam was more vocal than I was, not holding back his sounds of pleasure as I kissed down his jaw to his neck. It wasn't long before our lips were attached again and Sam started walking backwards, pulling me with him to his bed.

Sam fell backwards onto his bed, pulling me on top of him. I didn't know what had gotten into me, but all of a sudden my confidence skyrocketed and I straddled Sam's hips, grinding down on him slightly which caused both of us to let out moans. I reattached my lips to his before Sam rolled us over so that he hovered over me.

"We need to stop," Sam said, breaking away after a few minutes and still hovering over me.

"Why?" I asked in a breathy tone, breathing heavily.

He looked down at me with wild eyes, looking as if he just wanted to devour me on the spot. At that moment, I probably would have let him.

"I don't want to move too fast with you," he admitted, placing his hand on my cheek and tracing my bottom lip with his thumb.

I nodded in understanding, still slightly breathless. Sam smirked down at me before placing one last chaste kiss on my lips and rolling off of me so that the two of us were lying side by side.

It was at that moment that I knew I was all in with Sam. I wanted him more than I had ever wanted anyone. The feeling was foreign, but nothing about it felt wrong. In fact, nothing had ever felt more right.

I looked over at Sam to see that he was already looking at me with a smile. I mirrored his expression, leaning in to kiss him lightly on the cheek. He tossed his arm around me, pulling me tightly to his side and kissing the top of my head.

It wasn't long until the two of us were off into a soundless sleep.

***

"God, Mase. *Move!* " I woke up to Sam's voice in my ear.

Sam yanked the blanket roughly from me, leaving my body exposed. I instantly shot up and sent him a glare, tugging on the blanket.

"Give it back," I demanded, trying to pull the blanket away from him.

"You were stealing the blanket from me all night," Sam complained, holding onto it tightly.

The two of us were in a tug of war with Sam's comforter. He was obviously stronger than me so there was no way I was going to be able to get it back from him while he was awake. Eventually I gave up and let go of the blanket, putting a pout on my face as I tried to get back to sleep. Sam stretched out on the bed, his head close to me and the lower half of his body on the other side.

I shoved his shoulder, trying to get myself more room. "You're taking up the whole bed."

Sam ignored me, putting his head on my shoulder, his warm breath blowing on my neck.

" *Sam* ," I groaned. "Give me room."

He ignored me again, this time snaking his hands around my waist and pulling me toward him under the covers. I instantly felt the warmth from his body and cuddled into his side, sighing contently and falling back asleep almost instantly.

It wasn't long before I woke up to an empty bed. I lifted my head to look around the room and as I did, the door opened. Sam walked in with a white towel around his waist, water dripping down his hair and bare chest. I couldn't tear my eyes away from him as he moved toward his dresser in search for clothes.

"Morning," I said, startling him. Sam turned around with a look of surprise.

"Good morning," he replied, his face softening. "I didn't think you were awake. I was going to go make you breakfast."

I smiled. "You can still make me breakfast."

Sam chuckled, turning away from me toward his dresser to pull out some clothes. He tossed a t-shirt backwards, hitting me in the face with it. Next came a pair of jeans.

"Wear those," he said, grabbing some clothes for himself.

I knew Sam's clothes were going to be too big on me, but I really had no other option. I got up from the bed and tore my shirt over my head, fully aware of Sam's lust-filled eyes watching my every move. I smirked before tossing my shirt at him where it hit him square in the face.

"I can't watch?" he asked incredulously, holding my shirt in his hand.

I didn't say anything as I pulled his shirt over my head. The shirt fell little above my mid-thigh and the shoulders were too broad for me. Sam continued to watch me as I pulled off my jeans, discarding them on the

floor and pulled his on. I had to roll the ankles of Sam's jeans quite a few times since they were too long for me.

"Can I borrow a belt?" I asked, holding up the pants so they wouldn't fall down.

Sam wasn't *that* much bigger than me, but he was lean, hunky, muscular football player whereas I was more on the skinny side.

I forced myself to look away as Sam dropped his towel to get dressed. After he pulled his clothes on, he grabbed a belt from his dresser and handed it to me. Once my clothes were situated, the two of us went downstairs.

"Is your family not home?" I asked curiously. He hadn't even mentioned when they would be back.

"They're away for the weekend," he answered, walking by me toward the kitchen.

I followed him and sat down at the table while he pulled out a pan and started greasing it.

"Do you like pancakes?" Sam asked, turning to look at me with the pan in his hand.

I nodded enthusiastically. "Love them."

Sam smirked and nodded in my direction. "Good."

He quickly got to work, mixing the batter and putting it on the stove. After a few moments, I got up and walked over to Sam, hugging him from behind and resting my head on his back. I felt his back muscles move as he cooked, flipping the pancakes. I let my lips kiss up his back, getting up on my tip-toes to kiss the back of his neck. Sam let out a content sigh and placed his hand over mine.

Soon enough the pancakes were done and the two of us sat across from each other at the table.

"These are good," I voiced my shock. I didn't expect them to be horrible, but they were *really* good.

Sam chuckled and shook his head. "Thanks for sounding so surprised."

I rolled my eyes playfully. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Maybe you should start teaching me some stuff at the bakery," Sam commented with a smile, taking a bite of his pancake.

I nodded. "We should probably get a move on with that."

At least now I knew he wasn't completely hopeless in the kitchen.

Sam looked like he was about to say something when there was a sudden knock on the door. The two of us shared surprised looked before he stood up from the table to go to the door. As soon as he opened it, I heard a commotion and I automatically knew it was his friends who were at the door.

I checked my phone to see that Sam and me had slept in quite late. It was already past noon. I had never been one to sleep in so late, but sharing a bed with Sam made it quite easy to want to stay there.

Before any of his friends could get to the kitchen, I picked up mine and Sam's plates and brought them to the sink. A few moments later, Sam and his friends were in my presence. I instantly recognized Christo and Jake along with the other male that had been at the bakery one time before.

"Little Maloney?" Christo asked, looking confused. "What are you doing here?"

I cringed. "Is that really what you people call me?"

"Mason and I were just hanging out," Sam clarified, sending me a slightly worried look.

Jake scowled at me, but didn't say anything as he stood with his hands in tight fists.

"Weird," Sam's other friend said.

Sam rolled his eyes. "It's not weird, Owen."

I could tell that I was no longer welcome here by the looks on Sam's friends' faces. They looked as if they were trying to piece together why the two of us would want to be hanging out while simultaneously hoping I would leave.

"I think I should get going," I announced.

Sam's face fell. "You don't have to," he said.

His friends didn't say anything, probably hoping I would just go so they could do whatever they wanted with Sam and not have to worry about me ruining their time.

"Stay," Sam pleaded before I could say anything else.

I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was practically begging. After looking at him, there was no way I could deny him. Even with his friends here, I still wanted to spend time with him.

I nodded and soon enough, the five of us poured into the living room to presumably watch TV. I sat beside Sam on the couch while Christo was on his other side and Jake and Owen took the two-seat couch. Sam and I didn't sit too close, but our legs still touched slightly.

"We're playing Madden," Jake announced, going over to the TV to turn on the Xbox.

Sam's jaw was tense as he leaned back in his seat, waiting for Jake to hand him a controller. I could tell he was annoyed at his friends' sudden appearance.

"Do you want to play?" Sam asked me quietly after Jake handed him a controller.

I shook my head. Nathan had made me play Madden multiple times and I wasn't any good at it.

It didn't take long for Sam to get into the game, shouting at his teammate and his opponents. It was actually quite comical to watch and I had to stop myself from laughing on numerous occasions.

"Christo, what the fuck!" Sam yelled, throwing his hands up in the air.

"You're not passing quick enough!" Christo shouted back.

"I'm passing just fine," Sam argued.

Jake and Owen started cheering victoriously as their team scored the winning touchdown. Sam let out another curse and slammed his controller down.

"Switch teams!" Sam ordered, sending a glare to Christo.

Christo rolled his eyes. "Why don't you have your new best friend play with you?"

Sam looked at me and without giving me a choice, took Christo's controller and shoved it into my hands. I shook my head profusely, but Sam paid me no mind as he restarted the game. He gave me brief instructions on what he wanted me to do, and to avoid being yelled at, I complied.

The two of us ended up winning that game, but it was only due to Sam's instruction that I was actually able to play well. If he had just expected me to know what I was doing then we would have lost big time.

I laughed along with Sam as he started shit-talking Jake and Owen while the two of them glared over at us.

"So," Christo started. "Little Maloney, does Nathan know you're here?"

Sam glared at him. "Back off."

Christo held his hands up. "I'm just asking."

There was no way I was going to talk about Nathan with them, or give them any reason to think that I would. Just because I was with Sam didn't mean I was going to start telling him and his friends all about Nathan.

"Well, stop," Sam commanded and Christo seemed to let it go.

"I didn't realize you two were actually friends," Owen commented, no malice in his tone, just an observation.

"Yeah," Jake continued. "Especially after the whole thing with the car–"

"I told you he had nothing to do with that," Sam cut him off. "So stop talking about it."

"Okay, chill," Jake responded.

After a while, I noticed Sam and his friends became more casual and playful with each other. They joked around like I joked with my own friends and it was interesting to see after the awkwardness of earlier.

Sam looked so happy and at ease. He almost threw his arm around me, but as if coming to his senses, brought it back down by his side. Although they ruined our alone time together, I couldn't say it was awful hanging around with his friends.

"You coming, Mase?" Sam asked, standing up from the couch with his friends.

"Hm?"

"We're going to get some lunch," he told me as I stood up.

"I probably shouldn't," I admitted, looking from Sam to his friends.

It was one thing to hang out in public with Sam. Most people by now knew we worked together. However, it was a whole different thing altogether to hang around with a group of Knights. If my brother ever found out I was sure he would accuse me of becoming one of them.

Sam looked at me in understanding. "You're probably right. I can drop you off."

I grimaced slightly. "I'm not sure I want your friends knowing where I live."

"Hey!" Christo cut in. "Don't be a meanie, Mase."

I laughed and shook my head at him.

"We're not going to mess with your house," Jake said with an eye roll. "Let's just go."

Sam gave me a small smile, motioning for me to follow him out to the car. I got in the passenger's seat before Christo could reach it and he was sure to let me know that it annoyed him.

"You get the front this once, Mase," Christo warned, kicking my seat.

"Be quicker next time," I responded with a shrug, causing Sam to laugh.

"I *am* quicker than you," Christo replied.

There was no doubt in my mind that he was.

Eventually we made it to my house and I was pleased to see that no one was home. No one would see who it was that was dropping me off.

"Thanks for the ride, I'll see you later," I said, taking my seat-belt off.

I wished that I could lean in and give Sam a kiss like I was dying to do. I could tell by the longing look in his eyes that he wanted it too, but with the three pairs of eyes watching us from the back, we couldn't.

"Bye, Mase," he said casually with a small smile.

I got out of the car and made it up to the house. Sam didn't leave until he saw that I had gotten inside. I watched him leave and let out a sigh.

The state of my sexuality was still unknown to me, but at least now I knew that what I felt for Sam wasn't just curious infatuation.

It was something more.

**

Guys!! We reached our first #1 ranking with this story! (in the bxb tag). (it's fallen since then but i'm still happy). So I decided an early update was appropriate.

Also, the reads have gone up by 3,000 since I last updated so that's really cool too.

Thank you so much for all your reads, comments and votes! I love seeing what you have to say.

What do you think about Sam and Mason? What about Sam's friends?

Let me know! I'll update again on Friday :)

15

Mason Maloney

School has always come quite easily to me. It was rare that I ever had to put in a lot of studying to get good grades and I never had to spend too much time on homework. So when my English teacher allowed us to start our homework in class, I finished it quite quickly and stuck my earbuds in to listen to the playlist I had made for Sam.

Ross tapped on my shoulder, motioning for me to take my headphones. I complied and gave him a questioning look, raising an eyebrow.

"Can you help me with this one?" he asked, pointing down at his paper.

The homework was to do a close read of the book we were reading and jot down things we noticed while also answering some questions.

"Just write about the imagery," I answered. "There's tons of it."

Ross groaned. "I don't even know what that is."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, you do."

"I really don't!" he argued to which I just ignored him, putting my earbuds back in and resting my head on my desk.

It was then that Ross looked at me, quirking his eyebrow when his eyes zeroed in on my neck. He pointed a finger at me and plucked an earbud out of my ear. I sent him an annoyed glance, narrowing my eyes, before taking the other one out and sitting up.

"What?" I snapped in a forceful whisper.

"Who have you been making out with?" he asked in an amused tone.

"What are you talking about?"

Ross brought his finger to my neck. "You have a hickey."

Of course, I knew I had a hickey. I had multiple actually. They were in the middle of fading, so they were still quite prominent. When getting dressed this morning, I had purposely picked out a shirt that would cover the bruises on my neck, but the way I was sitting must have made at least one visible.

"That's not a hickey," I denied, trying to sound nonchalant.

Ross rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah? Then what is it?"

"It's... a birthmark," I lied, speaking slowly. "Yeah, a birthmark."

"Real convincing," Ross replied sarcastically, dropping the subject.

Soon enough class ended and we were headed off to meet the rest of our friends for lunch. It didn't take long for Ross to pull on my shirt and expose my bruise to Bella and Pete. Pete let out a cheer while Bella gasped loudly.

"Way to go, buddy," Pete congratulated, punching my shoulder lightly.

I shook my head at him.

"Who the hell gave you that?" Bella questioned, looking bewildered.

I shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter?" Bella scoffed. "You have to tell your best friends who you're screwing."

Pete shook his head. "No, he doesn't. We don't gossip like girls."

Bella and Pete started arguing and for once, I was glad. If only they knew exactly who I had been with. Ross ignored our other friends and started at me with a thoughtful look, his chin in his hand.

"What?" I asked him with my eyebrows raised. I didn't like feeling like he was analyzing me.

"I'm just thinking," Ross responded blandly.

"About?" I trailed, waiting for him to go on.

"It's just out of character for you to show up with a hickey," he explained casually.

I felt my cheeks heat up as I moved my shirt to make sure my marks were completely covered.

"Is it that big of a deal?" I mumbled.

Ross didn't say anything for a moment before he shrugged and looked down at his meal with a laugh.

"No, not really," he said.

Bella and Pete ceased their argument, each with their lips pursed in annoyance before Pete abruptly stood up, taking his tray with him. We each gave him a questioning glance.

"I have to go study for history with Macy Monroe," Pete answered our stares. "I totally forgot and that girl is crazy so I might be dead next time you see me."

Bella scoffed and crossed her arms over her chest, her jaw set tensely as she cast a dark look up at Pete, showcasing her obvious distaste for Macy Monroe. Macy just happened to be a cheerleader who had also hooked up with Sam Knight, but Bella's hatred for her went deeper than that.

"Don't die," Ross encouraged teasingly, waving at Pete who gave him a blank stare.

I chuckled at his expression and waved along with Ross. Pete shook his head at us and swiftly walked away, heading out of the cafeteria. Bella watched him leave, her angry expression never faltering.

"I can't believe he's willingly interacting with her," she complained.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm sure he doesn't have much of a choice."

"Still," she started, taking a quick sip of water. "He knows I don't like her."

That was a flaw in Bella that always seemed to show up. She thought that everything was a personal attack on her, kind of like how Nathan thought the same about my relationship with Sam. Bella took everything to heart which made her get offended easily. That was why her and Pete fought so often, because he wasn't tactful and she was sensitive.

Ross and I glanced at each other, having a silent conversation while Bella continued her tangent.

We listened to her complain for the rest of lunch.

***

"No, no, no," I said, pulling the piping bag out of Sam's hand.

"What?" he asked exasperatedly. "I'm doing it like you said!"

I sighed and tilted my head up at the ceiling for a moment before looking back at Sam who stood with his hands on his hips, his jaw set tightly and his eyes narrowed.

"No, you're not," I said slowly. "You have to hold it with your dominant hand toward the top. Your hand was too close to the tip."

Sam rolled his eyes and snatched the bag back from me quickly. "You could have just said that instead of freaking out."

Charlene had an order of cupcakes that needed to be ready by tomorrow morning, so she suggested that I teach Sam how to frost. It was quite simple since there was no design other than the easy spiral piping that was needed. Needless to say, Sam and I had gotten distracted with each other and now I was rushing to teach him how to frost the cupcakes, hoping he wouldn't mess them up.

"Hold it straighter," I told him as he lowered the piping bag toward the cupcake.

Sam snorted out a laugh. "That's funny coming from you."

I rolled my eyes but didn't comment, watching as he squeezed the frosting out and began piping on the cupcake. I watched carefully to make sure he didn't put too much. Once he was done, he lifted the tip and looked to me with his eyebrows raised and an arrogant smile curled on his lips.

"Looks good right?" Sam boasted with a coy smile.

Sometimes, I wished he wasn't so good at everything he did, but then I remembered I liked that he was good at what he did to *me* .

"Yeah, yeah," I responded, waving him off with a slight shake of the head. "I'm going to do the other half."

I turned to go fill another piping bag before Sam stopped me.

"Wait, teacher," he called out teasingly, his hand raised expectantly. "Can you help me? Maybe guide my hand?"

A loud laugh rumbled through my chest as I gazed at Sam, throwing my head back at the faux innocent look on his face. Sam mirrored my actions, his laughter being melodic, sounding like my favorite song.

"I think you'll be fine," I told him with a smirk, turning away again.

We stood in silence for a while as the two of us frosted the cupcakes. Once we were done, we moved the tray to the cake fridge where they would stay until the customer picked them up in the morning.

I leaned against the counter, staring at Sam intently as he stood in front of me.

"I finished the playlist I made for you," I announced suddenly, my voice slightly higher pitched than usual. My throat was dry as I awaited his response. I didn't know if he had taken our deal seriously, but I had.

"Did you?" he asked coyly, quirking an eyebrow up in amusement. "You'll have to send it to me."

I nodded, not really sure what to say. My brain was void of any thought and was fully focused on the boy in front of me.

"I'm almost done with mine," Sam continued, sparking my interest. "I'll finish it soon."

"Cool," I replied casually to which Sam just laughed at me, stepping closer and putting his hand on my face.

"Don't do that," he said with a small grin, tracing his thumb on my cheek.

"Do what?"

"You try to act all chill and cool and it's just..." he trailed, snaking his fingers into my hair. "It's just not you."

I gave him a strange look, my eyebrows pinched together. "Gee, thanks," I replied dryly.

Sam just chuckled. "I didn't mean it like that."

"What did you mean?"

"I meant you try to hide your emotions sometimes," Sam explained, his face set into a serious expression. "And I just like when you're being yourself."

I nodded in understanding. I realized I had this defense mechanism of acting like I was emotionless when things made me uncomfortable or nervous. I just didn't realize *Sam* had noticed that.

Sam's eyes darted down to my lips and I answered him by sealing our lips together gently. The kiss was more careful than any of our others. This one was chaste and innocent, almost like we had never kissed anyone before. It didn't take long for things to speed up, Sam quickly deepening the kiss and pinning me to the counter with his hands on my hips.

It had turned from sweet to heated within a matter of seconds. Our lips moved together at an expeditious pace, tongues meeting in the middle and my hands tangled in Sam's hair. Sam started snaking his hands up my body, caressing my skin under my shirt. Eventually, he tugged on my shirt, signaling that he wanted it off.

I didn't even hesitate before detaching my lips from his for a brief moment to pull my shirt and apron over my head and then bringing our lips back together. Sam's hands moved up my back and to my chest before resting on the back of my neck. He pulled his mouth from mine and looked at me with wild eyes before attaching his lips to my chest. I moaned at the feeling as Sam nipped and sucked on each of my pecs before moving up to my collarbone. My eyes were closed as I leaned my head back on the cabinet in full bliss.

The chiming of the bell was what finally pulled us apart. Sam's eyes were wide and his lips swollen as he looked down at me and the marks he made on my skin. He looked to the kitchen door and then back at me apologetically before leaving me to go to the front of the store.

I was still breathless when I pulled my shirt back over my head along with my apron, swiftly walking toward the front of the store where Sam was dealing with a man that seemed to be in his early forties. I watched as Sam finished out the order and sent the man on his way.

Sam sighed and leaned forward on the counter. "Is it closing time yet?"

My eyes darted to the clock on the wall. "Ten more minutes," I mumbled.

He nodded, slowing turning his head to look at me. Sam's eyes were dark with lust as he took in my features and I was sure my expression mirrored his as my eyes closed in on his red, swollen lips. He looked conflicted as he stood up straighter and made his way to me. Before I could question him, his lips were on mine only for a brief moment. We parted and Sam turned to the computer to start closing up.

I smirked confidently, brushing my hand on his lower back, before leaving him behind the counter so I could start putting the chairs on tables. We

stayed in a comfortable silence as we each finished out our tasks for the evening, thriving in each other's company.

***

My eyes were wide as I stood shirtless in front of my bathroom mirror, seeing the marks that Sam had left the night before. Painful looking red and purple bruises littered my chest, on both of my pecs and one bruise right in the middle. The marks looked almost unnatural on me, like they shouldn't be there or I wasn't worthy of them. I didn't know what to think other than I loved having Sam kiss me and he could mark me in whatever way he wanted and I would still find myself admiring his trail in the mirror.

Without warning, Nathan came barging into the bathroom. I jumped in surprise as I tried to cover myself, but it was too late. Nathan was already staring at my chest with wide eyes.

"Um..." I trailed, crossing my arms over my chest.

"You let a girl do that to you?" Nathan asked, sounding confused while squinting at the marks on my chest.

"Um..." I repeated, not knowing what to say. My voice seemed to be stuck in my throat, words having no chance at finding their way out.

Nathan let out a small laugh, shaking his head. "She's going to get attached if you let her do that."

I visibly cringed when he said the word girl, but thankfully he didn't notice. Nathan lightly nudged me out of the way at the sink so he could brush his teeth. I backed away from him, keeping my arms crossed and trying to make myself smaller. He looked at me out of the corner of his eyes and I instantly turned my body away from him, hiding my chest.

Part of me wanted to just scream at Nathan and tell him who my hickeys were from, but I knew that was a bad idea. That didn't stop me from thinking about how liberating it would feel to just confess, to let Nathan

know that he couldn't control who I interacted with just because he didn't like that person.

Doing that, however, would be unfair to Sam. I didn't know how he felt about people knowing his sexuality, I didn't even know what he identified as or if anyone else even knew that he wasn't straight. If I did tell Nathan about Sam and me, there was no doubt that he would use that against Sam and I couldn't let that happen.

And so, I left Nathan confused in the bathroom to get myself away from his scrutinizing gaze and also in hopes of preserving some of my modesty.

**

Thank you for all the reads, comments and votes! Please let me know what you think!

Who's your favorite character so far?

16

Mason Maloney

When Sam suggested taking me over to his house after work on Saturday, I was all for it. What the two of us didn't anticipate was his whole family being home, looking at us confusedly as soon as we walked in the door.

"Who's he?" a young girl, about the age of six, asked quizzically, tilting her head to the side.

The girl's eyes were a striking shade of bright blue that looked like deep ocean water. She had beautifully curled dirty-blonde hair that fell just below her shoulders. The young girl was almost a complete replica of her mother, the woman I had recognized from the time she came into the bakery, Mae.

"This is my friend Mason," Sam introduced me, squatting down to be eye level with the girl. "Mason, this is my niece Lila."

I smiled warmly at the adorable child. "Hi, Lila."

She stared at me with a blank expression for a few moments, as if deciding if she liked me based on this one small interaction. I almost expected her to shy away, but instead a wide smile took over her face and she threw herself at me, hugging my legs tightly. I chuckled, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Lila pulled away and looked over at Sam. "He's nice, I like him."

Sam shook his head in amusement. "That's good."

Mae stood up from her spot on the couch and walked over to where we stood, a welcoming smile overtaking her face.

"I recognize you from the bakery," she said happily. A man, who appeared to be her husband, followed her with a blank expression. His features

matched Sam's, making it obvious the two were related, though he was too young to be Sam's father.

"You two work together?" the man asked, looking between Sam and me.

Sam stood up at his full height and answered vaguely. "Yep."

"Well," Mae started, nudging her husband with her elbow. "I'm Mae and this is my husband, Jonah."

Mae looked back at the couch where a young boy sat, his eyes practically glazed over and glued on the TV. He looked to be about ten years old.

"Miles, don't be rude," she chastised her son.

"It's alright Mae," Sam started, touching her shoulder. "We don't need all these grand introductions. We're just going to go upstairs."

Before anyone could reply, Sam hastily grabbed my arm and pulled me along behind him. Sam pulled me all the way until we got into his room and he shut the door. This was one of the only times I had ever seen Sam uncomfortable. I left him standing by the door to go sit on his bed.

"You live with your brother?" I asked thoughtfully.

Sam still stood by the door, keeping his gaze away from me. When he did finally look at me I noticed his lips were pursed together with his eyebrows raised. He looked as if he felt awkward, though I didn't feel the same.

"Yeah," he answered blandly before coming over to sit by me on the bed, our legs touching.

I decided not to ask anything else even though I was dying to know exactly why he was living with his brother and his family. If Sam wanted me to know, he would have told me.

Sam let out a shaky breath, placing his large hand on my knee and staring straight ahead at the wall. I looked at the side of his face, taking in his sharp, handsome features. For the first time, I noticed a small, minuscule

freckle that was positioned just by his left eye. It was the only thing that made his face not perfectly clear, but it wasn't an imperfection. It seemed as though there was nothing imperfect about Sam.

"Are you okay?" I asked him concernedly, placing my hand over his on my knee.

Sam quickly looked to me and swallowed a lump in his throat. "I'm fine, I just didn't expect my family to be here."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "They usually go see Mae's parents on Saturdays," Sam explained.

I squeezed his hand comfortingly and let a small smile curl on my lips. Sam's pout softened as he looked over at me through hooded eyes.

"Stop being such a baby," I joked with a quiet laugh.

He sent me a dirty look, squinting his eyes and pulling his hand away from me.

"I was just upset I couldn't be alone with you, but not anymore," Sam retorted, sliding to his right to put space between us.

"Don't be like that!" I answered, moving closer to him and throwing my arms around his shoulders.

"Let go of me," he let out blandly, staying rigid in my arms.

I rested my head on his shoulder. "No."

We sat there in silence for a few moments, Sam sitting still in my arms while I held him tightly. Sam eventually squirmed to try and free himself from my grasp, but I didn't budge. He gave up and went back to sitting still, humming a familiar tune. I picked my head up and stared at him in shock.

"You're humming Troye Sivan," I pointed out the obvious.

Sam nodded slowly. "Well, it *is* on your playlist."

"You listened to it?" I asked, still shocked.

Sam sent me a strange look. "That was the point of making them, wasn't it?"

"Well, yeah," I started, pulling away from him. "I kind of didn't expect you to listen to it though."

He chuckled, stretching his arms in front of him to crack his knuckles. "You have no faith in me."

Before I could reply, a timid knock sounded on the door. Sam and I jumped apart quickly just before Mae opened the door ajar and popped her head in.

"Hi, guys," she greeted kindly. "I made some lunch and Lila wanted to know if you would come down for some family game time."

Sam groaned aloud, throwing his head back in annoyance. Mae sent him a knowing look, tilting her head to the side in an almost chastising manner.

"She's just excited you have a new friend over," Mae explained.

Sam turned to me. "Lila gets obsessed with my friends."

I let out a hum of understanding, nodding my head slowly. "I'm down for some games."

Sam sighed. "Of course you are."

I laughed as he stood up and walked to the door, opening it widely to reveal Mae's petite body. I quickly got up to follow him, the three of us heading downstairs. Jonah appeared to be setting up a board game in the living room while Sam and Mae led me to the kitchen.

"Uncle Sammy!" Lila exclaimed from her seat at the kitchen table. "Are you going to play games with us?"

Sam smiled warmly at her and kissed the top of her head. "Of course."

Lila let out a cheer before sticking a french fry in her mouth and chomping on it happily, bobbing her head up and down.

After scarfing down some sandwiches and french fries, Mae directed us to the living room where Jonah had set up a game of Monopoly Junior for all of us to play. Apparently it was Lila's favorite family game.

"I wanna go first!" Lila exclaimed, picking up the roller blade piece and setting it at the starting point. "Mason can be the car since it's my second favorite," she offered, handing over the piece.

Sam let out an offended gasp. "I thought *I* got to be the car."

Lila shook her head exaggeratedly. "You can be the hat."

"What if I don't want to be the hat?" Sam argued seriously.

"You can have the car if you want it," I interjected, but was quickly cut off by Lila's yell.

"No!" she screeched. "Mason is the car, Uncle Sammy is the hat."

"Indoor voices please," Mae scolded lightly as she walked back into the living room with Jonah trailing behind her.

Lila let out a quiet, "Sorry Mama," before continuing to place the pieces at the starting point.

"Where's Miles?" Mae asked aloud, looking around the room.

"He doesn't want to play, honey. Leave him be," Jonah answered, placing a hand on Mae's elbow and shaking his head.

Sam let out a sigh before sitting next to Lila on the floor. I followed his lead while Mae and Jonah each sat on the couch across from us. Lila didn't wait any longer to start the game. She tossed the dice down on the game board and counted the dots facing up quietly under her breath.

"I move five," she said, taking her roller blade and tapping it on each of the five spaces she moved on. "Your turn Mason!"

I smiled kindly at her before taking my turn, moving five spaces just like she had before.

***

"You can't do that!" Sam screamed in my face. "Stop cheating, Mason!"

"I'm not cheating!" I argued, pointing down at the dice on the board.

"You didn't roll them enough!" Sam replied, picking the dice back up from the board.

I gave him an incredulous look and held my hand out for the dice.

"How does one not roll the dice enough?" I asked, annoyance seeping through my tone.

Sam glared at me and shoved the dice into my hand. "You just plopped them down to get the number you wanted."

"No I didn't!"

"Mason didn't cheat, Uncle Sammy!" Lila defended me, tapping Sam on the arm.

"Is he always like this?" I asked in an accusatory tone, looking toward Mae who was shaking her head at mine and Sam's previous exchange.

Mae nodded. "Oh yes. Sam is very serious about anything competitive."

Jonah nodded along in agreement while Sam let out a disgusted scoff, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Excuse me for wanting to win," he said with an eye roll.

Before I could reply, I felt the vibration of my phone in my pocket. I pulled my phone out to see that Nathan had sent me a text message, asking where I was.

"You have to go?" Sam asked, studying the look on my face.

I nodded with a tight-lipped frown. Lila threw her head back with a groan before scurrying over to me, wrapping her small arms around me.

"Don't go," Lila pleaded.

"Yeah, don't go," Sam agreed with a smirk, his white teeth nearly blinding me.

"Let go of him, Lila. Personal space," Mae chastised in a stern, yet soft voice.

Lila listened to her mother with a pout. I made sure to give her a hug before standing up, Sam following my lead.

"Thank you for having me," I said to Mae and Jonah.

Mae stood up and gave me a hug while Jonah barely glanced in my direction. Instead, he moved past me and started picking up the game with the help of Lila. I tried not to let his disregard of me bother me, but this was Sam's brother. I *wanted* him to like me.

Sam led me toward the front door, away from his family. His strides were small as he glided down the hallway to grab his car keys and a jacket.

"Your brother doesn't seem to like me much," I commented blandly.

Sam just shrugged. "It's me he's pissed at, not you."

"Why is he pissed at you?" I wondered.

Sam shrugged again before walking over to me. "He's just moody. Don't take it personally."

I nodded in understanding. I knew exactly what it was like to have a moody brother. The thought reminded me that Nathan would most likely be home when I arrived, none too happy about me arriving with Sam.

"I can walk," I told him to which he responded with a disgruntled look, his eyes squinted as they zeroed in on my face.

"It's too far," was his reply before he stepped closer to me.

"Nathan can't see you dropping me off," I reminded him with my eyebrow raised.

Sam sighed and placed his hand on my cheek, pulling my face closer to his. He stared into my eyes for a few moments before leaning in and giving me a chaste kiss, letting his lips linger before hesitantly pulling away. As soon as he pulled away I looked behind him to make sure no one had seen what we just did. Sam got the message and turned around to make sure the coast was clear.

"I'll drop you off a little bit down the road," Sam compromised, taking his hand down from my cheek and placing it on my hip.

I nodded, looking up into his soft green eyes. "Okay."

The two of us hurriedly walked out of the house and to Sam's car. It was noticeably colder than it was earlier in the day, causing me to shiver and hug my arms tightly to my body. Sam immediately blasted the heat when we were in the car. He plugged in his phone to the auxiliary cord and shuffled his playlist, an old rock song playing softly on the speakers.

"I like this," I commented, looking to Sam who was focused on backing out of the driveway.

"Yeah?" he answered back blandly, turning to face forward in his seat once we were out of the driveway. "Please tell me you know what it is."

I rolled my eyes but nodded anyway. "Of course I know Queen."

Sam chuckled, opening the window and sticking out his left arm while driving with his right hand. The wind blew through his hair and the orange light from the sunset illuminated the prominent features on his face. I didn't know what about driving one-handed made him look so attractive, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him. Sam looked so calm and free with a small closed-lipped smile on his face.

"You can drop me here," I told him once we crossed the tracks into my town.

He turned his head and gave me a brief, quizzical look before shaking his head.

"Still too far," he said, showing no signs of slowing down.

I knew better than to argue with him about it so I just leaned my head on the window and took a deep breath.

"So is Queen your favorite band or something?" I asked, changing the subject.

"My dad's," he answered quickly.

While I was aching to ask about his parents, I decided it would be best for me not to. Sam's life seemed slightly secretive and he didn't talk about himself much.

Sam drove me all the way to the end of my street, about a two minute walk from my house. I would have preferred for him to drop me off further away to be sure Nathan wouldn't see us, but Sam wasn't having it.

"Goodnight," Sam said softly, turning to face me as I opened the passenger's door.

"Night," I replied with a small smile.

Before I could stop myself, I grabbed Sam by the front of his shirt and put my lips on his. He immediately responded to the kiss, almost like he was

expecting it. A few moments later, I hesitantly pulled away and let my lips hover over his for another few seconds.

"See you at work Monday," Sam said with a smirk.

I backed away from him and moved to get out of the car. "See you Monday."

I got out of the car and shut the door before waving to Sam. He waved back before putting the car into drive. I watched as he drove away until his taillights were no longer visible.

I sighed contently, kicking the rocks on the sidewalk as I made my way home, shivering as the icy breeze blew by.

**

Hello everyone! Thank you for all of your reads, comments and votes! I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

What do you think about Sam's family? Any theories about his parents?

Let me know!

IMPORTANT:
Also, my semester at college just ended so I'll be working at my job which means my schedule is going to change every week.

I will try my hardest to stick to my Wednesday and Friday updates, but some updates might be coming on different days when I find the time.

I'll still be doing updates twice a week, but they might just end up on different days.

17

Mason Maloney

"Can anybody find me somebody to–"

The song was cut off by Nathan abruptly switching the station. I gave him a dirty look out of the corner of my eye, but didn't say anything. Three days ago, I wouldn't have given the song much thought, but it had come to remind me of Sam and the way he looked the other night when he drove me home, devilishly and effortlessly handsome.

A random rap song started blaring through the speakers, causing Nathan to bob his head to the beat. I couldn't help myself from reaching for the radio to turn the music down. It was too early in the morning to have to listen to anything that loud.

"Quit it, Mase," Nathan said, batting my hand away from the radio and returning it to its obnoxious volume.

I decided it would be best not to argue with him. I rested my head against the window and closed my eyes, feeling the vibration from the bass shaking my skull and rattling my brain.

When we arrived at school, I was eager to get out of the car to be free from Nathan's awful taste in music. He quickly zoomed by me to go find his friends, people greeting him as he walked by. As I entered the school, I was quickly found by Bella who started walking beside me, talking about a dream she had last night.

"So my room was, like, infested with bees," Bella continued her story. "And when I walked in they all started swarming me."

"That sounds more like a nightmare," I pointed out as we stopped at my locker.

Bella nodded dramatically. "It gets worse."

I nodded, motioning for her to go on as I sifted through my locker to find what I needed for my first few classes.

"So I freaked out, obviously, and tried to run away but they attached themselves to me," Bella said with a slight shudder.

"Gross," I commented blandly.

"And then–"

"Shut up, Bella. No one cares," Pete cut her off rudely as he walked up to us with Ross beside him.

Bella's face instantly turned sour as she turned to Pete to shoot him a glare. "I was talking to Mason."

Pete shrugged. "And I'm sure he doesn't care."

I tried to cut in, but Bella beat me to it. "Well, since none of you care, I'm just going to go." And with that she angrily stomped off.

I glared at Pete who had a look of innocence on his face. Ross mirrored my expression, causing Pete to hold his hands up in defense.

"Would it kill you to be nice to her?" I asked seriously.

"It might," Pete replied seriously. "She's so dramatic."

"And you're insanely rude to her," Ross added pointedly to which I nodded in agreement.

"Stop ganging up on me," Pete whined, throwing his head back in annoyance.

Ross ignored Pete's complaints and turned to me. "Anyway, I wanted to ask if you wanted to go for a quick run after work today."

The two of us hadn't gone running in a while, so I knew in order to keep improving I had to keep practicing.

I sighed, closing my locker and leaning against it. "I guess."

Ross smirked. "Perfect, I'll pick you up."

"As long as Pete's not invited," I said, glancing at Pete to see his reaction.

"Hey!" Pete exclaimed, offended.

Ross smirked and nodded in agreement. "Even more perfect."

***

Sam strode into the bakery early for once. Well, early for him. Sandy still had around half an hour left of her shift but let out a sigh of happiness when she saw Sam.

"Hey, Sam," Sandy greeted, her tone a higher pitch than usual as she twisted her hair on her finger.

"Hey," he replied, barely sparing her a glance. He gave me a small smile and a nod of acknowledgement before walking past me to get to the kitchen.

"You're here early," I pointed out once Sam was back out in front, tying his apron as he walked.

He shrugged. "Practice let out early."

"Maybe I could go see one of your games sometime," Sandy interjected, stepping closer to Sam as he stood beside me.

He nodded apprehensively. "If you want."

I nearly groaned at his words. I wanted to be able to tell Sandy to back off from Sam, but I couldn't. He wasn't even mine to claim, yet I couldn't stop

myself from sending Sandy daggers with my eyes, not that she noticed since she was too busy shooting heart eyes at Sam.

It was then that I finally took a good look at Sam. He looked the same as he always did when he came into work. His hair was wet from his after-practice shower and pushed back off of his forehead. However, today there was something slightly different in his appearance that was so slight it seemed to have gone completely unnoticed by Sandy.

An unfamiliar silver chain was clasped around Sam's neck, the pendant attached stuffed into the front of his shirt. It was new, yet it looked so natural on him, like he had worn it a hundred times before.

I didn't speak much to Sam until Sandy left. There wasn't anything we could say to each other without her butting in with her two cents. She was still very obviously infatuated with Sam and I was sure that was the reason why I had grown more annoyed with her.

"Did you ever end up taking her to dinner?" I asked Sam once Sandy was out of the building.

He chuckled with a nod, striding over to the register. "Yeah, last Saturday night."

I tried not to let my disappointment show, but I knew my shoulders sagged and my mouth was turned into a frown.

"How was it?" I mumbled, leaning back onto the pastry case.

"Great, I think I'm in love with her," Sam said seriously, turning to face me before letting out a loud laugh. "Your face!"

I was sure my face was drained from all its color, my eyes as wide as saucers as I stood straight and rigid.

"Asshole," I muttered with an eye roll.

"It wasn't that great, bearable at most," Sam consoled with a soft smile. "That girl sure knows how to talk."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, I *know* ."

Even though Sam was denouncing their date as nothing, I couldn't help but envy Sandy for being able to be out publicly with him. Sure, he and I had gone out before as friends, but it wasn't the same. She could be on an actual date with him while I had to worry about being seen with him. I didn't even want to think about if they had kissed. The thought was too much for me to handle.

"Stop doing that," Sam pulled me from my thoughts.

"What?"

He rolled his eyes, stepping closer to me. "Thinking about it. It was just a stupid date. I didn't do anything with her."

I nodded, trying to act casual. "I know that."

I nearly shivered when he stepped even closer to me. The fact that he could read my thoughts so easily, as if he was reading a book, was enough to make my face blank to try hide them from him.

"This a new necklace?" I asked, running the back of my index finger on the chain.

Sam looked down at my hand and then back to my face. "No, it's just been hanging in my room for a while. Thought I'd start wearing it again."

I hummed in understanding, not saying anything else.

"It's my dad's," Sam added suddenly, pulling the necklace out from his shirt.

The pendant on the silver chain was a ring of the same color, only slightly shinier.

"Wedding ring?" I asked, my eyes staying trained on the pendant.

Sam hummed and nodded in agreement without elaborating.

My gaze turned up to meet his. His mouth was slightly agape, as if he was trying to say something but the words wouldn't come out. When he caught me staring, he closed his mouth and diverted his eyes back down to the necklace, effectively shutting me out from whatever thoughts he had.

It was obvious to me that his parents were no longer in his life, but I had no idea why. I didn't want to think that Sam had lost his parents, but I couldn't think of any other explanation.

I wanted to ask him about it, but I couldn't. I didn't want to seem intrusive and make him shy away from me. If he was going to tell me, then I wanted it to be on his terms.

Sam's face was pulled into a frown as he looked down at the ring. His eyebrows were knitted together while his teeth were clenched tightly. All I wanted to do was kiss his tension away. And I would have if that damn bell hadn't chimed.

The two of us quickly parted and turned to face the customer that had just walked in. She was a plump elderly lady that came in quite often. She always came in for banana bread and apple fritters.

"How are you doing boys?" the lady asked kindly.

Our customer service modes quickly kicked on as we interacted with the woman. Sam completed her order while I went to the kitchen to see if there was anything that was needed to be put in the front.

***

Sam played some music while the two of us started closing up the bakery. When I requested *Somebody to Love* by Queen, Sam was quickly to oblige and the song played loudly through the bakery along with Sam's awful singing.

He sang loudly and off-key, causing me to nearly double over in laughter. Seeing my reaction to his voice only caused him to continue, voice cracks

and all, singing along while I laughed my heart out. I could feel my abs forming now.

"You're no Freddie Mercury," I pointed out when I finally caught my breath.

Sam acted offended, placing a hand on his chest. "Are you kidding? We sound the same!"

I laughed again, throwing my head back and then looking over at him as he stood in front of me with a wide smile on his face.

"You're just jealous that *you* don't sound like Freddie Mercury," Sam said, pointing at me accusingly.

I let out a snort. "Yeah, that's it."

More songs played from Sam's phone and he continued to sing badly through all of them. I shook my head with a smile on my face as he used the broom as a microphone, his voice cracking as he tried, and failed, to hit the high notes.

Soon enough, we were ready to close up the bakery, the two of us walking outside after being sure we locked the door. The only car left in the parking lot was Sam's. He glanced at me, questioningly.

"Do you need a ride?" he asked, pointing his thumb to his car.

I shook my head. "No, Ross is picking me up."

"Do you want me to wait with you?" he asked kindly.

I smirked slightly. "I think I'll be fine."

Sam rolled his eyes. "You sure?"

I nodded. "I'm sure. He'll be here soon, you can go."

Sam lingered for a few moments before heading off to his car. I waved as he drove out of the parking lot before taking my phone out of my pocket to try

to get a hold of Ross. I had a text from him from half an hour ago.

gonna have to rain check on the run. sorry.

I let out a heavy sigh and stuffed my phone back into my pocket. It wasn't a big deal. I could just run some of the way home and that would be at least a mile. It wasn't like I *needed* Ross to run with me. I just like having him there to keep me from stopping.

I readjusted my backpack on my shoulders before taking off in a light jog toward my house. The orange streetlights on the road of the bakery did little to aid my vision as I trekked on. The sidewalk was filled with cracks, causing me to stumble quite a few times.

Eventually, I picked up the speed into a run. I already noticed that I wasn't as out of breath as I used to be at this stage in running. It was the first time I actually noticed an improvement.

I heard voices behind me and turned to look at the source briefly. Three teenage guys were walking a little ways behind me. I turned back around and picked up my pace slightly. I hated other people seeing me run since I sucked so bad at it.

The voices seemed to be getting closer even though I was running faster. I couldn't make out their hushed whispers, but when I turned around to look at them, it was obvious they were talking about me.

"Hey Maloney!" one shouted while the other two smirked in my direction. The one who shouted wore a gray "Knights Football" t-shirt.

My instincts told me to keep going so I quickened my pace again, hoping to get away from them. Their footsteps accelerated and soon enough, the three football players were running after me. It was obvious they were quicker than me because within a few moments one had grabbed my backpack to pull me to a stop.

"Why are you running?" he asked in a venomous tone, spinning me around to face him.

The three of them each had teasing looks on their faces, like this was some sort of game.

"I'm going home," I muttered, narrowing my eyes in a glare. The one in the middle kept a grip on my shoulder, effectively trapping me.

"We heard you like hanging around our QB," the one on the right said, his teasing face turning more serious with his words.

I didn't say anything. My throat dried up and my mind went blank.

"And we can't have you purposely throwing him off of his game," the one on the left added. "Or relaying team information to your brother."

The one in the middle gripped me harder while the other two circled me, blocking any way out I had.

"We're just going to make sure you know what happens when you mess with our team," the one in the middle said in a sinister tone before pulling me closer and jabbing his knee into my stomach.

I doubled over in pain, letting out a groan before he pulled me straight up and knocked his fist into my face. My head snapped to the side and my jaw instantly started throbbing painfully. One of the other guys grabbed me, holding my arms behind my back while another landed punches on my face and stomach. I could already feel bruises forming and tasted metallic blood on my tongue.

They eventually let go and threw me on the ground harshly, standing above me like I was some type of spectacle.

"It'll be worse for you next time," one of them said. I couldn't tell which one as my eyes were closed in pain.

One of them swiftly kicked me in the stomach before the three of them jogged away, leaving me bleeding on the cold ground. My breathing was labored and my whole body was throbbing in pain. I touched my face with my hand and was instantly met with warm, sticky blood that covered me. I

lifted my head up slightly to make sure they were gone before I forced myself onto my feet.

As I limped and stumbled the rest of the way home, I ached and winced. It felt as though the pain prolonged my journey and I suppose it did since I was moving slower than usual.

Once I was home, I opened the front door quietly, hoping I could clean myself up before anyone saw me. My parents weren't home, but I knew Nathan was as I heard the TV on in the living room. The living room I had to walk through to get to the stairs. I hoped he just wouldn't look at me.

I was wrong.

As soon as I walked in the living room Nathan's eyes widened and his face turned red in anger. Tony and Rick sat shocked on the couch, staring at my bloody face. Nathan stood up and stomped over to me.

"What the fuck happened to you!" he screamed loudly.

"Noth–" I started, my voice sounding hoarse.

"Don't you dare say nothing," Nathan spat, pointing a finger at me. "This is not *nothing* ."

"Just some guys when I was on my run," I explained, my voice quiet and raspy. It even hurt slightly to talk.

"Who?" Nathan demanded.

I knew if I admitted just who it as that harmed me, Nathan wouldn't be able to control himself. He would march over to Sam's house and demand names and then proceed to kick the shit out of everyone in his path.

"Dammit, Mason! *Who?* " he yelled again, his anger rising. "I swear to God if it was Sam–"

"Oh, fuck off, Nathan," I said, glaring at him. "It wasn't Sam."

"But it was a Knight?" Nathan tried to confirm.

I didn't say anything and that was all the confirmation he needed.

"I'm going to kill–"

"Nathan, just leave it alone," I cut him off, almost pleading with him.

"You think I'm going to let them get away with this?" Nathan asked incredulously. "Not a fucking chance."

"Just..." I trailed, looking over at Tony and Rick who still looked shocked. "Chill out."

Nathan cursed under his breath and pulled at the ends of his hair, looking insanely frustrated. I took the opportunity to stride by him up the stairs where I would clean myself up.

My bones creaked like the second step did as I made my way to the bathroom. When I finally glanced at myself in the mirror I saw my swollen, bloody face.

Blood seemed to have been coming out of my nose and a gash underneath my left eye. There was bruising around the top of my nose, both of my eyes, and on the right side of my jaw. I slowly lifted up my shirt to see the purple bruises that littered my ribs and stomach and I winced at the sight.

These bruises weren't like the ones Sam gave me. These weren't marks I was happy to wear.

**

Thanks so much for all the votes and comments!!! :)

How did you like the chapter?

Please let me know!!

18

Mason Maloney

No one tried to hide the fact that they were staring at me when I walked into school the next morning. Nathan walked by my side, glaring at everyone we passed.

When I looked at myself in the mirror this morning, I finally got a good look at my injuries. Purple and brown bruises littered my face that looked as painful as they felt. The cut underneath my left eye was red and swollen along with my nose. I looked completely broken and defeated and I suppose I was.

"Stop following me," I commanded Nathan, shifting the strap of my backpack on my shoulder.

"I'm not," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

I shook my head while shooting him a glare. At this rate it seemed like he was never going to leave me alone.

By the time we got to my locker, it was obvious that Nathan was indeed following me. He never stopped at my locker, especially not in the mornings when he usually went to throw a football around with his friends before classes started.

I was about to reprimand Nathan, but a loud, high-pitched gasp cut me off. The two of us turned to see Bella with both of her hands covering her mouth in astonishment. Her eyes were wide and glossy as she walked over to me a placed her hand lightly on my face.

"What happened?" she asked, her voice so soft it was nearly a whisper.

"I don't want to talk about it," I answered seriously.

Bella turned to Nathan for an explanation, but I shoved him lightly on the shoulder, signaling that I wanted him gone. He sighed before turning and walking away, undoubtedly going back outside to where his friends were.

Ross and Pete were quick to make their way over to Bella and me, both with wide eyes.

"What the fuck?" Pete said.

"Mason?" Ross asked worriedly. "What the hell happened?"

I had never seen Ross look so worried.

"Don't worry about it," I said, brushing off their concerns.

"How can we not worry about it?" Bella asked in disbelief.

I just shrugged and pursed my lips together tightly.

"Just don't."

***

Sam Knight

There were a lot of things I never imagined I'd see in my lifetime, like seeing Freddie Mercury perform live and viewing Earth from space. Needless to say, I was surprised when I noticed Nathan Maloney leaning against my car, glaring at everyone who spared him a glance.

I stopped suddenly, Christo and Jake on either side of me. The three of us watched Nathan curiously, as if afraid of what he was going to do. Without waiting for the others, I began walking over to my car confidently with my head held high. I wasn't going to let Nathan Maloney make me look weak. Not in this lifetime.

When he noticed me walking toward him, he pushed himself off of my car and stomped over to me with his face set in a hard expression. His teeth were clenched and his hands were in tight fists.

"We need to talk," Nathan demanded coldly.

I didn't know what to think, but I kept my offensive stance up. I wasn't about to let him come after me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked through clenched teeth.

Just being in the same area as Nathan was enough to make me tense. I could tell he felt the same way, neither of us taking our eyes off of the other. Christo and Jake eventually made their way over to me, looking ready to pounce on Nathan if needed. Nathan's eyes looked as if he was killing each of us with just a glance.

"I told you, we need to talk," he said again.

"You should go, Na–" Christo started.

"Shut up," Nathan spat, not even looking in Christo's direction. "I'm talking to Sam."

My teeth were grinding in my mouth as I did my best to keep calm. Nathan and I seemed to bring out the worst in each other. I stood tall and tense, Nathan mirroring my actions as we stared each other down.

People stared at us as we walked by, letting out shocked gasps and intrigued whispers. It was appalling to everyone that Nathan had even dared to step foot on this campus alone, but to me, it just showed how unafraid he actually was. By the look on his face, I could tell he wasn't leaving until he got to talk to me.

"Make it quick," I said. "I have to get to work."

"Sam–" Jake started.

"It's fine," I cut him off. "Go."

Christo and Jake left us, glancing back at us warily as they did. Nathan and I moved back over toward my car and it looked like it was taking all of his

strength not to shove me against the vehicle. He was breathing heavily, looking down at the ground.

"What do you need to say?" I asked, trying to sound casual but failing.

"You need to keep your team away from my brother," Nathan seethed in almost a whisper.

"What are you talking about?"

Nathan's head shot up at my words, a look of disgust on his face. "Like you don't know."

I tried to piece together his words in order to make sense of them. From my knowledge, no one on the team had ever bothered Mason, but according to Nathan, that wasn't the case.

"I don't," I answered honestly. "What are you talking about?"

Nathan stared at me suspiciously, as if trying to decide for himself if I was telling the truth. I noticed out of the corner of my eye other members of the team making their way over to us with looks of anger on their faces. I waved them off, signaling to leave us alone, though I knew they would be lingering in case anything went wrong with Nathan.

"I don't know who, but some guys from your team jumped Mason last night," Nathan admitted coldly.

His words were enough to cause my breath to hitch in my throat. Anger instantly consumed me, my face heating up as I tried to remain calm. My head all of a sudden felt hot and I had the urge to punch something.

"Jumped him?" I croaked out, my voice cracking slightly.

Nathan nodded. "He's busted up pretty bad."

My heart fell to my stomach. This was my fault. I should have driven him home last night despite his protests.

"So look," Nathan started again. "You better keep your team in line because if anyone even thinks about touching Mason again, you're all going to pay."

"I'll talk to them, find out who did it," I said affirmatively. "They went too far."

Nathan nodded and looked as if he was two seconds away from exploding. He bit his bottom lip and looked straight at me.

"Never again," he said, pointing a finger at me.

I nodded with a serious expression on my face. Nathan glanced at me one last time before turning around and angrily stalking off.

***

Mason Maloney

Ross sat at one of the tables at the bakery, doing his homework. When he saw me this morning, he felt so bad about cancelling our run that he decided he wasn't going to let me out of his sight for the rest of the day. And so, he vowed to sit in the bakery for the entirety of my shift and drive me home later. I had told him it wasn't necessary, but he wouldn't listen.

My eyes shot to the door when I heard the bell chime. Sam walked in later than usual, his hair already almost completely dry and a look of anger on his face. His jaw was set tightly and his posture was rigid and tense. I had thought about what I would do when I had to face him, but none of my thoughts had actually prepared me.

Sam walked straight over to me, paying no mind to Ross who was shooting him daggers.

"Who was it?" he asked icily, his voice quiet and sounding like he was trying hard to hold onto his composure.

"I don't know," I answered.

Sam shook his head and took a deep breath. "I'm going to find out who."

He was beginning to sound like Nathan. "Don't."

Sam stared at my face with his mouth slightly agape. His expression softened as a look of sadness crossed his face. His eyes were dull and his lips pulled into a frown. Sam's hand twitched at his side as if he was aching to touch my face.

Sam's lip quivered slightly, but he quickly recovered.

"You look terrible," he said.

"Thank you," I replied with a smirk.

My smirk quickly vanished when I remembered what had happened the night before. I stepped back, putting distance between us. Sam clenched his jaw, pulling his lips together tightly when he realized what I was doing.

"Stop," he said quietly. "I'm going to take care of it."

"Your team doesn't want me near you," I reminded him, motioning toward my face. "They made that pretty clear."

Sam looked as if he was going to start yelling, but I held my hand up to silence him. We couldn't talk about this here, not with anyone around to hear us.

"Please just let it go, Sam," I pleaded, my eyes growing wide.

He let out a deep breath and shook his head slightly.

"We'll talk later," he said before walking to the register, his shoulders tense.

***

Sam Knight

I sat at my usual lunch table in the center of the cafeteria, glaring at everyone around me. The team was acting normal, as if none of them were

guilty of anything. A cheerleader I couldn't even remember the name of leaned toward me, rubbing her hand on my thigh, but I paid her no mind.

I looked around at my team, trying to figure out who had jumped Mason and would face my wrath later on. They probably didn't think anything of it. They thought because they were Knights they could do whatever they wanted, especially when it came to messing with the Warriors. This time they went too far.

"Dude," Jake snapped me out of my thoughts. I turned to him, pushing the desperate cheerleader's hand off of my leg.

"What?" I asked blandly.

"You look out of it," he said, taking a large bite of his burger and chewing with his mouth open.

I shook my head and looked down at my fully occupied tray. Everyone at the table had sent me a curious look during lunch. God forbid I wasn't joining in on conversation or acting like I cared about anything they were saying. It was like since I was the quarterback everyone thought I had to be involved in everything. It was bad enough that most people in this school followed me around and treated me like I was some sort of superior. I didn't want to have to submit to what they wanted me to be.

"Dude," Jake nudged me.

I looked over at him again with a scowl on my face.

"Can you at least pretend to be interested in Mercedes?" he whispered under his breath.

"Who?" I asked at full volume.

Jake sent me an annoyed look and whispered again, "The girl that's basically throwing herself at you."

I looked to my left slightly to see the cheerleader who was previously rubbing my leg before Jake smacked me on the arm, causing me to look at

him.

"Why should I?" I asked in an annoyed tone.

I couldn't help but wonder if Jake had been one of the guys to hurt Mason. He was never too fond of him and he had voiced to me before that he thought I shouldn't hang around with him.

"Because," Jake started, "I like her friend so we need to keep both of them happy if I have a chance with her."

"I don't see why I have to go out with a girl for you to get with another girl," I said quietly.

Why did girls have to make things so complicated? It would be so much easier if they just got with the person they wanted to be with instead of playing some stupid game. Maybe that was why I was never too invested in girls.

"Do you know anything about chicks?" Jake asked rhetorically. "Taylor won't go out with me if you ignore her best friend. Girls do everything together."

I shook my head in annoyance and stood up from the table when the bell rang. My teammates and the cheerleaders followed behind me as I left the cafeteria after throwing my lunch away.

"Make sure you're at practice on time today," I said, stopping Jake before he walked away from me. "I want to have a meeting before we practice."

"About what?" he asked with an eyebrow raised.

Christo mirrored Jake's look as he stood behind him, waiting to go to class.

"Is this about whatever Nathan talked to you about?" Christo asked, stepping closer to me.

"I'm not getting into the details right now," I said with authority in my voice. "Just make sure everyone knows to show up on time."

I walked away from my friends without another word.

***

The locker room was always loud while the team got ready for practice. Coach was in his office so no one had to worry about him overhearing anything they were saying. Today wasn't any different. Everyone seemed to have gotten the memo to make sure they were on time, but that didn't stop them from being their obnoxious selves.

Christo stood beside me as we stood at our lockers, my arms crossed over my chest as I waited for the late bell to ring. Our practices started during the last period of the day during football season, counting as our elective for first semester.

As soon as the bell sounded, I let out a high-pitched whistle to get everyone's attention. The talking stopped and all eyes were on me as I stared out to the crowd with a glare.

"Everyone listen up," I started sternly. "Some people in this room have gone too far to mess with the Warriors."

I looked around at every confused face in the room, trying to find a guilty one.

"Who wants to own up to it?" I asked seriously as my eyes continued to scan the crowd.

Christo turned to me with a confused glance while Jake walked forward out of the crowd to stand on my other side.

"What's going on?" Jake whispered. I ignored him.

"Someone is going to own up to it or I'm going to let Coach deal with this," I threatened harshly. I was only met by confused stares.

I rolled my eyes in annoyance, knowing that all of them were not innocent.

"Why do you care about what was done to a Warrior?" one of the players dared to ask. He was a Junior, second-string receiver. Definitely not someone who should be questioning me.

I stepped closer to him and stared him in the eyes with a glare. He stepped back slightly.

"We do *not* physically harm anyone on or associated with the Warriors," I said seriously. "That is not the team we are going to be."

The Junior averted his eyes from me, looking at one of his friends who was staring at the ground.

"It was you, wasn't it?" I asked, backing up slightly. "Who was with you?"

The kid looked like he was about to shit his pants. I would've laughed in his face if I wasn't dead serious at that moment. I was never really a super uptight captain and that was probably part of the reason why the team voted for me to lead them, but this I was going to be uptight about. I had to be.

"Don't make him ask again," Jake said coldly. I could practically feel his scowl from behind me.

"Yes, it was me," the kid abruptly admitted. "We thought we were doing you and the team a favor by getting that Maloney kid out of your hair."

"Shit," I heard Christo mutter.

It took everything in me to keep my anger in check. I was never one to get incredibly angry, but this had me testing my patience.

"You're lucky Nathan came to talk to me about this instead of just retaliating," I told him with my jaw clenched. "Who else was with you?"

More like he was lucky *I* wasn't going to kick his ass, no matter how badly I wanted to. I couldn't let any of them see how much I actually cared for Mason, and I knew Mason wouldn't want me to hurt anyone.

The Junior looked as if he was rethinking his entire life. His eyes darted from me, to his friend, and then back down to the floor. I turned to his friend to see that it was another Junior, one that I knew named Kyle, first-string.

"Own up!" I yelled, looking straight at Kyle. He sighed and nodded in confirmation.

"Connor was in on it too," Kyle admitted, pointing his thumb at the guy to his right who looked at him with wide eyes.

I nodded and held my lips together tightly for a moment.

"You three will run extra sprints until I decide you've had enough and you're on clean up duty for the rest of the season," I said, looking at each of them. "And you're benched the next two weeks."

"You can't do that!" Kyle exclaimed.

I raised my eyebrows at him defiantly. "I can do what I want. Unless you want Coach getting involved."

Kyle remained silent.

"And if any of you *ever* pull something like this again," I started, making sure every guy in the room was paying attention, "it's going straight to Coach and you'll be off the team."

The look of fear in their eyes was enough to tell me my message was received. I motioned for everyone to continue getting ready before turning back to Christo and Jake.

"Why didn't you tell us they messed with Little Maloney?" Christo asked curiously.

I just shrugged, though I knew exactly why I didn't tell them. I didn't want them to see how worked up I had gotten when I found out he was hurt. They would know something was going on if they saw me care so much

about what happened to him. At least this way I could mask it as some moral belief for the team.

"What did they do?" Jake asked as he pulled his shoulder pads on.

"They kicked the shit out of him," I muttered through clenched teeth.

"No shit?" Jake asked as if he were stunned.

"Is he okay?" Christo asked.

He was always more sympathetic toward the Warriors considering his cousin was one of them.

"He'll be fine," I answered before slamming my locker door shut and trudged out to the field.

**

Thanks for reading!!!

How do you feel about Nathan and Sam's interaction? What about Sam's reaction?

Please let me know what you think :)

19

Mason Maloney

"I want you to tell me who did this to you, dammit!" my father exclaimed, smacking a fist down on the kitchen table, making the plant in the center shake.

My mother stood to his left, animated tears brimming her eyes as her lip quivered. I had managed to hide my injuries from my parents for the last few days, staying up in my room when I knew they were around. Eventually, my father caught me this morning before school and flipped out. Luckily for him, I didn't have work today so he was able to grill me about it after school, my mother and him taking the afternoon off.

"I don't know who it was!" I yelled back, my ribs aching suddenly from the force. "I didn't recognize them!"

"Do not raise your voice at me Mason," my father said with a shaking finger pointing at me.

I sat back in my chair with my arms crossed and let out a deep sigh. I just wanted all of this to go away, to not have to think about it anymore, though I was reminded every time I dared to make a move.

"Honey," my mother started, sliding into a chair to sit across from me at the table. "We just want to help you."

Her voice wavered slightly as if she was barely holding onto her composure, but she looked at me with a smile as she reached out to rub my arm comfortingly.

"Where the hell was Nathan?" Dad asked, throwing his hands up in the air. "Why were you walking home alone?"

"I told you I was supposed to go for a run with Ross," I reminded him with a bit of bitterness in my tone.

"Then why didn't you call for a ride?" he asked me impatiently.

"Why are you blaming me?" I raised my voice, uncrossing my arms and putting my hands down on the table.

"Mason," Dad warned.

I stood up, pushing the chair out clumsily. "Stop acting like this is my fault. I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm done."

I walked away from the table, hoping to get upstairs to my room before my father tried lecturing me again.

"Mason!" he tried to stop me.

I heard my mother whisper something to him and when I turned around, the two of them were staring at me. My mother smiled at me and motioned for me to continue going up the stairs, so I stomped up to my room and locked myself in.

As if on cue, my phone buzzed with a text from Bella.

How did talking with your parents go??

I sighed before replying, sitting down on my bed.

Not good. Want to get out of here.

Her reply was instant.

Smoothies?

Bella was quick getting to my house to pick me up. I briefly told my mother where I was going before I left the house in a hurry. I threw myself into her passenger's seat and she quickly took off.

"That bad, huh?" Bella asked with humor in her tone.

"It was like an interrogation," I said, shaking my head in annoyance.

"They just want to protect you, Mase," she replied, looking at me briefly before turning back to the road.

"And I just want to go on with my life," I muttered, looking out the window at the changing trees as we drove by.

The leaves were changing more rapidly now to their oranges and reds. The trees still held onto most of them like ornaments for now, but it was only a matter of time before they set them free and leaves would decorate the ground handsomely.

Once we arrived at the mall, the two of us immediately jumped out of the car and went toward the entrance, eager to get to the smoothie stand.

"I can't decide if I want to get mango or strawberry-banana," Bella said as she walked beside me, digging through her purse for her wallet and dropping a crumpled receipt on the floor.

I thought for a moment before responding. "Get mango, you always get strawberry-banana."

She hummed in agreement. "I know, but it's just such a classic flavor. It will never disappoint me."

I chuckled, my movement causing the bruises on my face to throb. My whole body still ached from my injuries. I could feel where each of my bruises were every time I moved. I tried to ignore it, but sometimes it was hard, the pain being too much to ignore.

I had gotten used to all of the stares at school, along with the people rushing to my side, begging to know what had happened to me. They were just feigning concern, I knew they were being nosy. The stares I was getting out in public as we entered the mall were different. Instead of concern, faces

were filled with bewilderment and disgust as if I was some lower-class citizen infringing upon the public's leisure time.

"Ross feels really bad about what happened you know," Bella said, turning to face me as we waited in line at the smoothie stand.

Her petite figure caused me to have to look down at her with my sullen expression.

"I told him not to worry about it," I said, motioning for Bella to move forward when the line moved.

"I know," she started. "But he still blames himself. You should talk to him."

I sighed and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "I have talked to him. I don't know what else to say other than it's not his fault and I don't blame him."

It was difficult to get through to Ross about this. I had never seen him look so guilty, the way he looked whenever he looked at me over the past few days. It sort of made me feel guilty that he felt that way.

"Maybe if you tell him enough, he will finally understand," Bella suggested with a grin before turning to order her smoothie. She went with the mango.

"Hi, what can I get for you?" the boy at the counter asked when it was my turn.

"Uh..." I trailed, looking by him at the menu. "I'll get the strawberry colada."

He grinned and punched my order in on the register. "That will be $5.49."

I handed him my card, looking over at Bella who was already sipping on her smoothie as she waited for me. I walked over to her to wait for mine after my card was back in my wallet. Soon enough, my smoothie was ready and we headed to the food court to sit.

Bella immediately made her way to a table beside the window. I could never understand why she always wanted to sit here. It wasn't like there was an amazing view. All we could see was the parking lot and the highway, nothing spectacular. But Bella insisted on sitting here every time without fail.

"You were right about getting mango," Bella told me with a smile, sipping on her drink happily.

"It didn't disappoint?" I teased with a grin of my own.

She shook her head. "No, I'm happy I got it."

Bella looked out the window happily as she took another sip of her smoothie. I followed her line of vision out to the parking lot. I still couldn't understand why she loved staring out this window. All I could see was a bunch of cars and a mother dragging her two children through the parking lot. There was nothing out there to marvel at.

She soon turned back to me with a smile on her face, but he smile quickly dropped as she looked at something behind me. I gave her a confused look.

"What?" I asked confusedly.

Bella didn't say anything, she just pointed behind me. I turned around to follow where she was looking and when I saw it, I didn't know whether to be happy or upset.

Sam sat a few tables away from us with Jake beside him and two girls sitting across from them. My hopes that it wasn't a date were crushed when the girl across from Sam sneaked her hand into his and leaned closer as if she wanted to kiss him. I turned away before I could see it happen.

"I was stupid for thinking he would date me, wasn't I?" Bella asked sadly, looking down at her cup and mixing her drink with the straw.

I sighed and shook my head. "No, he's the stupid one."

"I thought you guys were getting along now?" she questioned, looking up at me.

"We are," I confirmed. "Sorta."

It was hard not being able to express exactly what it was that I was feeling in that moment to Bella. Sam and I weren't dating, but that didn't mean that it felt good knowing he was going out with someone else while also kinda, sorta going out with me. I wanted to scream. I wanted to be able to stomp over there and yell in his face, but I couldn't. We weren't dating. He never made a commitment to me. I should've known better than to think Sam Knight would feel obligated to be exclusive like I did.

"Oh shit," Bella suddenly said as she was still looking toward Sam.

"What?" I grumbled, not wanting to look at him.

"They're walking over here," she told me.

Before I could even turn around, Sam and his friends were beside our table. At first, he didn't see me, but when Jake held a hand out to stop him, his eyes widened.

"Wow, they really did a number on you," Jake commented as he stared down at my face. He looked intrigued rather than sympathetic.

"Yeah..." I trailed, letting my eyes wander to Sam who was holding hands with the girl from before.

Sam looked insanely uncomfortable and even a little guilty. His grip on her hand loosened, but she didn't allow him to let go, practically holding him hostage.

"Sam took care of them for you, didn't you," Jake said, deflecting the conversation to a tense looking Sam.

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, I did."

"Thanks," I said, though I wasn't feeling thankful at all. I was willing to say anything to get out of this situation.

"Let's go," said the girl clinging to Jake's arm. "We have to go now so we can hang out at your place for a while before I have to go home and watch *The Bachelor* ."

Without another word, Jake and his girl walked off. Sam hesitated for a moment before the girl his was with started tugging on his arm.

"See you tomorrow, Mase," he said sullenly before giving into the girl's tugs.

Bella and I watched as the two left with blank expressions.

"Well, that was awkward," Bella said once they were out of sight.

"You could say that again."

***

Sam Knight

"I have to work, Mae!" I exclaimed to my sister in law as I sped to work with my phone between my shoulder and my ear.

"I know, I'm sorry, but I got held up at work and Miles is off at a friends house so he can't watch her," she explained. "Please just get Lila from school and bring her with you, I'll get there as soon as I can."

I sighed, but gave in anyway. Who was I to say no to someone who let me live at their house for free?

"Fine," I said. "I'll go get her."

"Thanks so much Sammy!" Mae exclaimed happily. "I owe you one."

Thankfully, Lila's school was only down the street from mine, so it wouldn't put me too far out of my way. Lila would usually take the bus home and

stay with Miles at the neighbor's house for about half an hour before Mae got home, but since Miles was going to a friend's today, Mae was going to get out early to pick Lila up. Obviously, it didn't work out as planned.

Once I was in the elementary school parking lot, I parked the car and scurried inside and into the cafeteria where the children all waited to be picked up by their parents. I was met by a faculty member meant to be signing kids out.

"Who are you picking up?" the older woman asked me.

"Lila Knight," I answered, pulling out my ID for verification.

The woman took my ID and looked through the laptop that was sitting in front of her. I could see Lila from where I stood and once she made eye contact with me, she came running.

"Hi Uncle Sammy!" she yelled, throwing herself at me and causing me to stumble.

"All set," the woman said, handing me back my ID.

"Thank you," I replied, holding Lila in my arms before taking her out of the school.

"Where's mom?" she asked once we got in my car.

"She's stuck at work," I answered as I started moving out of the parking lot.

"Boo!"

"You're going to have to hang out with me at work for a little while," I told her, looking at her reaction through the rear view mirror.

"Will you buy me sweets?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

I chuckled and nodded. "I'll buy you *one* ."

I quickly got her out of the car once we were at the bakery. I was always late to work, but now I was even more late than usual. Thankfully, the shop didn't look too busy so Mason wouldn't have had to deal with crowds all by himself.

Mason looked at me strangely when I walked in holding onto Lila's hand.

"Hi Mason!" she yelled excitedly.

His face instantly lit up. "Hi Lila!'

"She has to hang out here for a while," I told him, dragging her over to the table closest to the register so I could keep an eye on her.

"That's fine," he said dismissively before turning back to Lila.

"Are you hurt?" Lila asked him worriedly, pointing at the bruises on his face.

"A little bit," he admitted. "But I'll be fine."

I left the two of them so I could go get my apron and when I came back, Mason was sitting with Lila while she showed him some drawings from her backpack.

"Do you have homework?" I asked, causing both of them to look at me.

Lila rolled her eyes. "Yes."

"Then get to it," I said. "And then I'll buy you a treat."

Lila instantly pulled out her pink homework folder and got busy with work. Mason smiled down at her before getting up and walking by me to the counter. I grabbed his arm and sent him a pleading look.

"Can we talk?" I asked quietly.

He shook my hand off. "There's nothing to talk about."

Mason continued to go behind the counter to which I followed him, blocking him from going into the kitchen.

"Yes, there is," I insisted.

"I'm over this," he said with a cold look, motioning between the two of us.

"What do you mean?"

He sighed and leaned against the pastry case.

"Look, it's obvious your team wants me to stay away from you," he answered, motioning toward his bruised face.

"I don't–"

"And apparently you have a girlfriend, so I don't see the point in continuing whatever *this* was," he cut me off.

"She's not my–"

"It's done, okay? I'm done," Mason said in a final tone.

"Will you let me get a damn word in?" I asked angrily, keeping my tone low and stepping closer to him.

"There's no point," he responded, looking over toward Lila who was intently focused on her homework. "No one wants us to be associated together, so we should just stop."

"What about what I want?" I asked desperately. "What about what *you* want?"

Mason turned to look me in the eyes. His eyes looked dull, like he was closing off his emotions. He hesitated for a moment as he stared at my pleading gaze.

"It doesn't matter," he finally said.

"Yes, it does," I pressed further.

"Stop, it's done," Mason said before brushing by me to hide out in the kitchen.

I stared at the spot where he previously stood, thinking about what had just happened. The two of us weren't dating, but I felt like I was just broken up with. I was used to getting what I wanted and to people wanting me.

Mason Maloney was the one thing I couldn't have and that made me want him all the more.

**

What do you guys think about what happened with Sam and Mason? Do you think Mason overreacted?

Thanks for all the reads, comments, and votes! Please keep them coming!

Let me know what you think!

20

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

Mason Maloney

"Do you boys want me to make some dinner before the game?" my mother asked as she barged into my room where Pete, Ross, and I sat.

"Sure, Mom," I answered, not taking my eyes off of the TV.

Pete turned toward her, a ridiculously innocent smile on his face. It took everything in me not to smack him.

"That would be great, Mrs. Maloney. Thank you," Pete said politely before my mother walked out of the room.

This time I didn't hold back my smack. Pete's head snapped over to me with an offended look on his face.

"What the hell was that for?" he asked incredulously.

"You know what," I responded to which Ross nodded in agreement.

"Quit hitting on his mom, dude," Ross told him, leaning back onto the headboard.

"I wasn't," Pete muttered, crossing his arms over his chest with a pout.

Ross gave me a knowing look but it quickly turned into a grimace as his eyes found the injuries that were still visible on my face. He looked away down at his lap and let out a sad sigh.

"Stop it," I said to Ross, nudging him with my shoulder.

He continued to feel guilty no matter how many times I told him it wasn't his fault. He wouldn't let it go.

"I know, I know," he said. "I can't help it. If I had just picked you up..."

"Then it would have happened some other time," I told him. "It was inevitable, Ross."

"I still can't believe your brother didn't kill them," Pete added, turning to face us from the foot of the bed.

"That would only cause more problems," I said.

We dropped the subject after than and I was glad. I didn't know how many times I had to say I was done thinking about the situation before the people around me started to get it. I still couldn't have a normal conversation with my father without him trying to pry names out of me.

After my mother called us down for a brief dinner, we made our way to the school for the football game. The bleachers were already packed as usual, but I could see Bella sitting with some of her friends, her short legs stretched out across the bench to save seats for Ross, Pete, and me.

"Hey!" Bella yelled, waving her hands to get our attention when she saw us ascending the bleacher stairs.

I waved to let her know that we saw her before making our way to the seats, sliding by the crowd of people at the end of the aisle.

"You guys have to get here earlier next week!" Bella exclaimed as the three of us sat down.

"We had dinner before," I told her to which she sent me a pout.

"Did you guys go out without me?" she asked.

Pete leaned over from beside me to face her. "No, Mase's hot mama made us food."

I glared at him before shoving him forcefully into Ross's side.

"Cut it out with the mom jokes," Bella said, obviously annoyed.

"Oh, I am very much *not* joking," Pete replied, causing me to turn and face him with another glare.

Pete held his arms up in surrender and gave me an innocent smile while Ross shook his head at him in disbelief.

"I'll stop," Pete promised, almost seeming sincere.

I shook my head, looking out toward the field. "I don't believe that."

Conversation stopped once the game started since everyone was focused on what was going on. The Warriors won the coin toss and Nathan chose to receive the ball in the second half, like he always did.

The opening drive wasn't good for our defense considering they allowed the other team to score a touchdown. I could practically feel Nathan fuming from here. I looked down at him to see that he was standing in a tense position with his right knee bent and most of his weight on his left leg. His arms were crossed in front of him and I could only assume there was a look of anger on his face. He always stood this way when the game wasn't going the way he planned. It was his way of showing that he, as the captain, wasn't pleased.

After the other team kicked their extra point, Nathan practically sprinted out to the field, eager to even the score. His first pass connected with his receiver perfectly, earning the team a first down. The next pass, however, was incomplete.

Nathan prided himself in his passing performance with his high rate of completions. He rarely ever missed his target more than once or twice a game. So when his receiver let the ball fall to the ground on the second pass of the game, Nathan was obviously worked up.

Pass number three: incomplete.

***

I stood against the fence while waiting for Nathan to get off the field as he was the last one there. The Warriors had managed to pull out a win, yet

Nathan still wasn't happy.

"Hey!" I shouted, getting his attention. Nathan shot me a look and motioned for me to go out onto the field.

"Let me throw to you," he said once I was out there.

I sent him a confused look. "Why?"

"I'm working on my throw," Nathan said as if stating the obvious before throwing a perfect spiral my way without warning.

The ball bounced off my hands and onto the ground. Nathan and I shared identical looks of annoyance.

"That was a perfect pass," he said, gesturing toward the ball.

"I wasn't ready," I answered, bending down to pick it up before lightly tossing it back. The ball bounced off the ground and went back up high enough for Nathan to catch it.

Once the ball was in his hands, Nathan sent it back my way with another perfect pass. This time I caught it.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked, throwing the ball back harder than the last time.

"I need to work on my throw," he answered blandly, throwing the ball back again. "Back up more."

I obliged and caught the ball once he sent it to me.

"Your throw is already perfect," I reminded him with my eyebrows raised.

"It wasn't tonight," he said, his jaw set tightly.

I held onto the ball, tucking it under my arm and refusing to throw it back to him. Nathan scowled at me, clearly showing his annoyance.

"Everyone has their off days, Nathan," I told him sincerely. "And even when you have yours, it was still pretty perfect."

Nathan shook his head hastily. "It wasn't good enough."

"Why not?" I asked, almost yelling at him. Nathan was arrogant a lot of the time, but he was also his harshest critic.

He crossed his arms over his chest and his face softened. I knew I was getting to him, I could see the vulnerability on his face.

"There are only two high school quarterbacks in the country right now averaging over 300 passing yards a game," Nathan said, looking down at his cleats. "Me and Knight."

"Okay?" I was still confused as to why he was so upset. That sounded like a good thing to me.

"I only had 250 tonight," he explained, looking up at me. "I had twelve incomplete passes and 250 passing yards."

"So?" I asked incredulously. "The other guy had like twenty incomplete passes."

"But he's not me, Mason," Nathan nearly shouted, his voice wavering slightly. "He also only averages 250 yards a game."

It didn't surprise me that Nathan knew the stats of his opponents.

"I have to play Sam Knight in less than a month," Nathan continued, stepping closer to me. "I can't be having games like this, I need to be playing my best."

Nathan's hands were clenched so tightly into fists that his knuckles were turning white. His face was surprisingly not flushed with red, but his eyes were wide with worry.

"You need to give yourself a break," I told him seriously. "You're going to have off games, and so is Sam, it's not the end of the world."

It hurt to see Nathan looking so dejected. He worked harder than anyone I knew and yet he still felt as though he wasn't good enough.

"I don't have time to give myself a break," he said with a sad smile. "This is my last shot to get into a D1 school."

"And you will," I consoled him. "Stop beating yourself up over it, it won't help."

Nathan didn't say anything. Instead, he looked up at the sky and then over at the empty bleachers before nodding his head toward the exit.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go home."

"Thank God," I said with a smile. "It's fucking freezing out here."

Nathan laughed as the two of us walked side by side off of the field.

"I just have to go change," Nathan said as we neared the locker room. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Let me grab the keys from you," I said, following him into the locker room.

The locker room was musty and sweaty, it even felt hard to breathe in there. A few players were still there in the showers, but most had already left. Nathan quickly took off his jersey and pads before rummaging through his duffel bag to find the car keys.

Rick suddenly came around the corner with a white towel wrapped around his waist and stopped at the locker beside Nathan's. I quickly averted my eyes from him, not wanting to see more of Rick than I had to.

"Good game, bro," Rick said, opening up his locker.

Nathan just huffed in response, pulling the car keys from his bag.

Rick laughed. "Don't be like that Maloney, we'll beat that fag Knight when the time comes."

My heart seemed to stop at obscene word that left his lips. I back peddled before turning around and leaving the locker room, not even bothering to say a parting word to my brother.

***

To say work on Monday afternoon was awkward between Sam and I was an understatement. It seemed as though it was more awkward for me than it was for him. Sam seemed to always know how to work his way around a situation and I envied him for it.

He was being my favorite version of himself, lively and carefree as he cracked a few jokes with the customers he was serving. It made it hard for me to stay away. What made it awkward was that I had no idea what to say to him. There seemed to be nothing to say, so there was a silence between the two of us.

Much to my surprise, Christo walked into the shop with a beaming smile on his face and waltzed over to the counter just as Sam finished up with another customer.

"You know what I'm here for," Christo said to him with a knowing look before turning to me. "Hey little Maloney."

"Hey," I replied, leaning against the pastry cabinet.

"How's your face?" he asked, looking genuinely interested.

"Fine," I said blandly.

"Good, good," Christo said before looking back at Sam. "I need to order a cake, you know this, get me a cake form thing."

I chuckled lightly before walking into the kitchen to grab an order form and then bringing it back out to fill out.

"What are you getting?" I asked Christo, causing both him and Sam to look my way.

"A cake," he replied with a deadpanned look. I turned to Sam and we shared a look of confusion before both turning back to Christo.

"What size?" I asked him, figuring I would have to help him through the process of ordering.

"Large?" Christo said hesitantly with a shrug.

"That's not how cake sizes work, dumbass," Sam said with an eye roll.

"Well, I don't know!" Christo exclaimed. "Not all of us work at a bakery."

I looked to Sam with a pleading look, hoping he would explain this to Christo so I wouldn't have to.

"Get him a full sheet," Sam told me, causing me to mark it on the order form.

"Is that big?" Christo asked. "I need it big."

"Our full sheets feed at least sixty," I told him. "Depending on how you cut the pieces."

"Make it a marble cake," Sam continued, ignoring my conversation with Christo. I marked marble on the form. "Traditional vanilla frosting."

"It needs to be Halloween themed," Christo reminded him to which Sam nodded and I wrote a note on the sheet. "And say 'Happy Birthday Tony'."

"You're buying Tony's birthday cake?" I asked confusedly.

Christo nodded. "Big party at his house that Friday the same week as Halloween. You're invited."

Tony was one of those unlucky people who had a birthday on a holiday. I supposed that having a birthday on Halloween was better than having one on Christmas, but he still had to share that day with the rest of the world.

"Any specific design?" I asked.

"Nah, just make it look cool," he said, waving me off. "How much will it be?"

"Forty," I answered, finishing off the order form. "The cake will be ready by noon on that Friday."

"Cool," he answered. "I'm out of here. See you guys later."

And with that, Christo walked smoothly out of the bakery, leaving Sam and I alone for the first time since our shift started.

"Are you going to go to Tony's party?" Sam asked, turning around to look at me.

I thought about it for a moment before shrugging. "Don't know yet. I guess I'll see what my friends are doing."

"I don't know if I'll go," Sam said, surprising me. "I have to be somewhere early the next day."

I nodded, not knowing what to say. All I knew was that I had to try my hardest to keep my eyes off of Sam because the more I looked at him, the more I wanted to kiss him and I couldn't do that. No one wanted us together. Sam was messing around with other girls the same time as me. I had to keep reminding myself of those things, otherwise I would want to take him to the kitchen and attack him with my lips.

"Plus, it might not be such a good idea to have a party at Tony's," Sam added, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Why?" I asked absentmindedly.

"Because we're getting closer to the rivalry game," he said with a knowing look, playing with his dad's ring on his chain. "You know how it gets, the closer it is."

"Yeah," I said with a nod.

He was right. There were so many things that could go wrong with having the Warriors and the Knights under one roof less than a month before the Thanksgiving game.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you if anyone from my team gives you a hard time," Sam said teasingly, a smirk smacked on his face.

I rolled my eyes. "Thought you already took care of that."

"I did," he confirmed seriously. "I'm just messing with you."

"Funny," I said sarcastically.

"You used to think I was funny," he pointed out with a small grin.

"I was faking," I lied, holding back a smirk.

"Oh I see," Sam said. "You were just faking because you *liked* me."

I shook my head, a small laugh leaving my lips despite me trying to keep it down.

"You can tell yourself that," I answered sarcastically.

"It's okay because I liked you too," Sam said seriously. "Still do."

My face contorted into a glare at his words. I was trying hard to keep my feelings for him away and it seemed like he was doing everything he could to mess with that.

"Stop," I demanded seriously.

"What?" he asked, feigning innocence. "I'm just being honest."

"Well don't," I answered quickly, turning around and storming into the kitchen.

I leaned forward on the counter in the kitchen, closing my eyes tightly out of annoyance. I needed to stop letting Sam get to me in this way. I had

practically convinced myself that my feelings for him were temporary and they would go away on their own, but when he said things like that to me they all came flooding back.

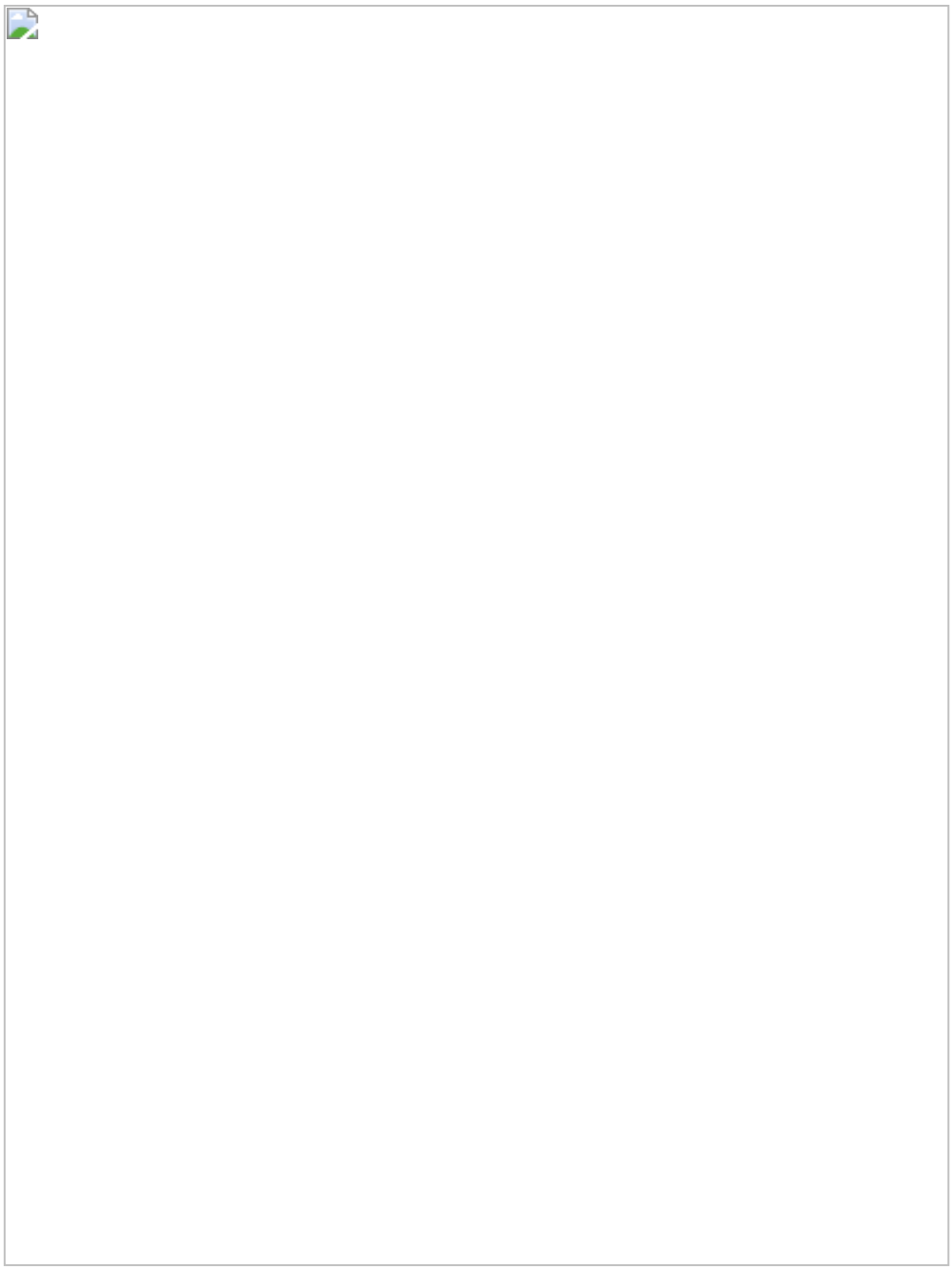
Sam Knight was no good for me, but he was all I wanted.

Sam Knight was what I couldn't have.

**

Thank you to @AbigailSuarez1 for the amazing covers!!!!

I have the covers attached, so please take a look :)



Please let me know what you think of the chapter!

What did you think about Mason and Nathan's chat? What about Sam and Mason?

21

Mason Maloney

Jealousy was a funny feeling and it was something I had rarely ever experienced. It was like a feeling of envy kept pricking at my brain while I continuously tried to push it out but failed to do so. I gritted my teeth, angry at myself for feeling this way as I watched Sam lean over the counter and whisper sweet nothings to the girl on the other side, who I found out was named Mercedes.

I had told myself that I wanted to keep my distance from Sam and for him to do the same for me, but when it actually came down to it, I hated that his attention was on someone else. I had no right to feel that way, but I did.

Mercedes was obviously better suited for Sam than I was anyway. Firstly, she was a girl. Secondly, she was a cheerleader. And finally, she was undeniably good looking. Her and Sam looked good together, like they belonged. The two of them together made sense.

And so, I tried to push my jealousy aside, but it proved to be a difficult feat. I watched as Mercedes grabbed Sam by the collar of his shirt to press her lips against his. I should have averted my eyes, but instead I decided to torture myself as her cherry red lips caressed his.

My eyes were narrowed as she pulled away from him with a coy smile before walking away to leave the bakery. I leaned back against the pastry case, my arms crossed over my chest as I glared at the door that Mercedes just left through.

"She's not my girlfriend," Sam suddenly said, turning to face me.

"Hm?" I hummed, staring at him confusedly.

He just rolled his eyes. "I know you were staring. She's not my girlfriend so you can stop thinking that."

"I don't care," I lied. I did care. A lot.

Sam clenched his jaw, looking as though he wanted to say something but was holding himself back. He turned away from me to face forward, looking out the windows of the bakery before turning back to me again with a look of anger.

"I hate when you act like this," he told me vaguely.

"Like what?" I asked curiously.

"Like this!" Sam said, gesturing toward me. "Like you don't care about anything, like you're holding back."

My jaw set tensely as Sam stared at me with his mouth open, breathing heavy.

"I don't care about whatever that girl is to you," I told him seriously, though I knew I was lying.

Sam's face went from angry to annoyed as he shook his head at me.

"I don't know what you want me to say, Sam!" I said, not being able to stop myself.

"I don't want you to *say* anything," he replied, stepping closer to me.

I stepped back, my back hitting the doorway leading to the kitchen.

"Do you expect me to just wait around for you while you mess around with someone else?" I asked incredulously, my stomach turning in nervousness.

"You're the one that broke things off," Sam reminded me with his eyebrows raised.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest. "You were with her before that."

"You didn't let me explain," he argued, his eyes piercing mine.

"I didn't need to!" I started. "It's obvious you were out with her."

Before Sam could say anything, I continued.

"It doesn't even matter, it wasn't even about that," I told him, pointing to my face where my injuries were still visible.

"I took care of that," Sam said, basically pleading.

"I know," I agreed with a nod. "It doesn't matter, alright?"

"So can we stop being weird around each other?" Sam asked seriously.

It took me a moment to form a response. Sam knew barely anything about me, yet he knew the most secret part of me and I didn't know if I could trust him with it. I didn't know if I could trust him at all.

"Sam..." I trailed, looking up at the ceiling. "I still think we should just stay away from each other."

I looked back down at him to see that he was glaring at me. I could practically see the fire bursting in his forest green eyes.

"Whatever, fine," he spat, looking away from me. "We can just go back to the only thing being between us is work."

"Sam–"

"And I can be with Mercedes without worrying about how you feel about it," Sam continued. "And we can just barely talk to each other like before, sound good?"

Sam turned around completely so he was no longer facing me, leaving me stunned with my heart aching.

***

Sam Knight

"You don't have work today?" Jonah asked as he walked into the kitchen while I rummaged through the cabinets for something to eat.

I shook my head. "Day off."

Jonah stood behind me, leaning against the island in the middle of the kitchen with an unreadable expression on his face. I turned to face him as I grabbed a box of crackers from the cabinet, giving him a confused look with my eyebrows pinned together.

"I brought your laundry to your room," he started with his eyebrows raised.

Shit.

"And I found a naked girl in your bed," Jonah continued.

"I told her to get dressed," I said casually with a shrug, though I felt highly uncomfortable at the situation.

He gave me a doubtful, disbelieving look of annoyance with his face set in a serious expression.

"Why are you having sex in the middle of the day?" he asked incredulously as if he couldn't believe he had to be asking his younger brother this question.

I shrugged, popping a cracker into my mouth. Although, I knew why I was doing it. Part of me was trying to help Jake out with Taylor by keeping Mercedes happy and the other part of me was looking for a distraction.

"Just..." Jonah started with a sigh. "Just please be careful. I know I'm not the best example of abstinence in high school, but trust me when I say that you do not want to have to deal with the consequences of not being cautious at your age."

Considering Jonah got Mae pregnant with their son, Miles, at seventeen, I could understand why he was trying to look out for me.

I rolled my eyes. "You can stop acting like my dad, Jonah. I use protection."

He let out a small, breathy laugh and shook his head, still looking incredibly uncomfortable with our conversation.

"I just don't want you to make the same mistakes I did," Jonah admitted. "I love Miles so much, but it was really hard taking care of him while we were still in high school."

"I know," I responded with a nod. "I remember the nights he stayed over, waking the whole house up."

Jonah chuckled and nodded in agreement. "He was a loud baby, so different than he is now."

I nodded in agreement, continuing to eat the crackers as I leaned against the counter.

"I just want what's best for you, you know?" Jonah said after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah, I know," I answered lightly.

"I don't want you to throw yourself around like you don't matter," he continued. "I want you to know your worth, Sam."

I couldn't find the words to respond. Sometimes it felt like Jonah was the only person who truly cared for me, yet I still didn't want to listen to him. It was still hard for me to view him as a guardian.

"Do you even like that girl?" Jonah asked when I said nothing. "Does she even like you?"

"She's friend's with someone Jake is seeing," I told him with a shrug.

"So?"

"So I'm seeing her to keep everyone happy," I admitted with a blank face.

Jonah rolled his eyes. "That's not cool, Sam."

I gave him a tight-lipped smile, pushing myself off of the counter.

"Please spare me the lecture," I said as I passed him on my way out of the kitchen. "I've had enough for today."

"Whatever, I'm just trying to be helpful," he answered, turning t face me. "This is hard for me too, you know."

I ignored my brother and continued my way back to my room. He had no idea how hard it was for me to be under his care. It was part of the reason why we weren't as close as we used to be. I felt like a burden to him and although he tried hard to make me think otherwise, I couldn't. I pushed my negative thoughts from my head as I shoved my bedroom door open with my shoulder.

Mercedes was awake when I walked into the room. She sat up on the bed, my t-shirt covering her bare body as she mindlessly scrolled through her phone.

"I'm going to get going," she said without looking up at me. I didn't even give her a response as she pulled on her jeans and changed out of my shirt, throwing it down on the floor.

I sat at my desk, looking out the window as I waited for her to leave. Mercedes walked over to me and took my face in her hands before planting a wet kiss on my lips and leaving the room without a goodbye.

I didn't even want to think about her. I moved to my bed so I could lie down, staring up at the ceiling and thinking about what had happened with Mason yesterday. He had made me so angry and I couldn't stop myself from saying those harsh words to him. I knew he was just scared and hurt about what happened with the guys from my team. And it hurt knowing I couldn't do anything to protect him from what was already done.

My bedroom door opened, tearing me from my thoughts. I picked my head up from my bed to see Jonah standing in the doorway, making his way over to me. He sat on the edge of my bed and turned to face me.

"I wish you would knock," I said before he could say anything.

"Sorry," he muttered, looking down at my comforter.

Jonah stayed quiet for a few more moments. I sat up, giving him an annoyed glance.

"Is there a reason you're in here?" I asked none too kindly.

His head shot up to meet my harsh gaze. His expression was surprised at first, then it grew to match mine.

"I wasn't done talking to you down there," he said seriously. "And I just saw your girl leave."

"She's not my–"

"Yeah, I know," he said. "I don't like that you're leading her on. It's not right and it's not the man you should be."

"You don't need to tell me who I should be," I replied, feeling myself get more annoyed each second that ticked by.

He ignored me to continue his lecture. "You need to treat people with respect, Samuel."

"I don't see how this is your business," I said through clenched teeth.

Jonah may have been one of the only people that truly cared about me, but he was also one of the only people who could truly get under my skin. The two of us butt heads constantly and it was mostly because he had to parent me.

"Your well-being is my business," Jonah answered with a sarcastic smile. "And the way you treat others is part of your well-being."

"Mercedes is doing the same thing to me," I told him seriously.

It wasn't like the two of us were serious. Neither of us had really been in long-term relationships and we definitely weren't going to start by dating each other.

"So you should stop seeing her because you're not respecting her or yourself," Jonah said in a stern voice.

I didn't want to tell my brother that I was with her to fill a void, that the one person I wanted was the one I couldn't have. He wouldn't understand considering he had been with Mae since high school and the two had never fallen out of love since.

"If you want to be with someone, you need to be with someone who you respect and who respects you," Jonah continued. "I don't like you bringing girls into our house that are just casual hookups. My kids don't need to see you with a million different girls."

"Not everyone gets to be with who they want to be with like you do!" I exclaimed before I could stop myself. I kept my face stern as I tried not to let him see my nerves or embarrassment.

Jonah gave me a confused look. "Is there someone that you want to be with?"

I groaned and threw my head back, lying back down on my bed and shoving my hands to my eyes.

"I don't want to talk about this with you," I muttered quietly.

"I want you to talk to me," Jonah said, moving closer to me. "I've been wanting to start talking to you more. That's why I'm doing this."

I moved my hands from my eyes to glare at him. "You want to start talking more so you decide you're going to butt into my personal life?"

"I want to be a better brother to you," he started. "Brothers talk about this stuff."

I gave him a wary look, unsure if I wanted to confess anything to him.

"If you talk to me about what's bothering you I will give you brotherly advice instead of parenting you," Jonah asserted with a serious look.

"Promise?" I asked, still unsure.

"Promise," he confirmed.

I still didn't know whether I could trust Jonah to not act like he was my parent, but it wouldn't hurt to talk to him about this. I missed him as being just my brother.

"I like someone," I started, sitting up. "But it's been kinda rocky with them."

"Rocky how?" he asked, leaning back against my headboard.

"Like we weren't really together, but I think we both wanted to be," I continued. "And we broke up before we even started dating."

"What's stopping you from being together?" Jonah asked curiously.

I let out a sad laugh, leaning my head back on the headboard.

"So much I can't even explain," I said, turning my head to look at him.

"Well, whatever it is, if you really like this person then no outside forces matter," Jonah said, looking straight at me. "If you really want to be with them, then nothing should be able to stop you."

Jonah didn't press me any further and if he did, I didn't think I would be able to continue. My situation with Mason was confusing, but there was one thing I was sure of. There was nothing I wanted more than to have him by my side.

**

Thank you for reading! Please let me know what you think :)

What do you think about the Sam and Mason's fight? What about Sam and Jonah's talk? And Jonah's role in Sam's life?

Also, someone asked if I could post some pictures of what the characters look like and I just wanted to know if everyone wants me to cast this story?

22

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

Mason Maloney

"What is wrong with you?" Pete asked, flicking me on the side of the head as I stared off into space.

I looked over at him with an unsatisfied glare, my eyes hooded and squinting at his accusatory expression. Pete raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes as if telling me to answer him. I looked by him to see Ross and Bella each staring at me with unreadable expressions.

"Nothing," I finally answered, throwing myself back to lie down on the ground.

The four of us sat on the soccer field, which was next to the football field, after having ran around the track before the football players started practice. The grass on the field could be felt through my clothes, giving me an uncomfortable itch, but I paid it no mind. I stared up at the clear, blue sky and wondered how my mind could be so clouded when there wasn't a cloud in sight.

"I kinda feel like you're lying, just saying bro," Pete said as he lay down next to me, his shoulder nearly touching mine.

I didn't respond, but I told myself I was just tired from running. I wasn't actually upset over Sam. It was the physical exhaustion that made me seem so out of it. I let out a sigh, realizing I couldn't even convince myself of that, let alone my friends.

"Get up," Bella suddenly said, standing in front of the two of us with Ross standing behind her.

Bella held out her hand to me and pulled me up with a yank. I stumbled into her slightly before catching my balance as Pete stood to his feet.

"Let's go cheer you up," Bella said with a smile, looping her arm through mine. The gesture made me smile back and I let her lead me to Ross's car where we all piled in.

It didn't take long for me to realize where we were headed. Soon enough, we arrived at Bella's house where her silver Toyota Camry sat in the driveway all alone. Bella grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the car as soon as Ross had it parked, leading me up the driveway to her front door. She led me over to the couch in her living room before walking off to the kitchen. Ross and Pete sat on either side of me as we waited for her to return.

"What are we doing?" I asked, leaning over to Ross. He smiled and shrugged.

"We noticed you were bummed out today," Ross started. "So we decided to pig out and watch some movies. You get to pick."

I grinned slightly.

"Just don't pick anything dumb," Pete said, leaning back in his seat.

Bella quickly returned with cans of soda and a bag of chips, placing them on the coffee table in front of us. She grabbed the remote before squeezing her way between Pete and me.

"I put some mozzarella sticks in the oven," she said, turning the TV on.

"Thank God," Pete said dramatically. "I'm starving."

"What else is new?" I joked to which he shot me daggers. "What? You know I'm right."

Pete's face softened and he had a look of realization.

"You know what? You are," he agreed.

"Go pick a movie, even though we all know what you're going to pick," Ross said teasingly.

"I don't know if I'm in the mood for *Pride and Prejudice* ," I confessed with a sigh.

Bella's eyes widened as she turned to stare at me. "You have never *not* been in the mood to watch *Pride and Prejudice* ."

"I need something I've never seen before that'll make me cry," I said seriously. "I need a good cry."

Bella thought for a moment and then nodded before standing up. "I have just the movie."

She scurried up the stairs to her room, her feet pattering quickly on the floor. Bella was back in less than a minute with a blue movie case in hand. She hastily walked over to the DVD player and put in the disk before coming back to the couch and sitting in her original spot.

"What is it?" I asked curiously.

"It's called *Call Me By Your Name* ," she answered. "Don't ask questions, just watch."

"Will it make me cry?" I asked.

"I said don't ask questions!" Bella snapped. "But yes, it will make you cry."

I took her word for it and settled comfortably on the couch.

"Is this another gay–?" Pete started.

"Shut up!" Bella exclaimed, cutting him off. He muttered something under his breath before crossing his arms over his chest.

My eyes didn't leave the screen the entire duration of the movie and by the end, the four of us were holding back tears. Well, I wasn't holding them

back. My tears freely left my eyes along with Elio's as he kept his gaze on the fire place.

"God!" Pete exclaimed, wiping his sleeve over his wet eyes. "Did they have to make us watch him cry for that long?"

I laughed, wiping my own eyes as the credits finally rolled on the screen. Ross sniffled beside me, though no tears fell from his eyes. Bella was full on bawling, gripping onto me and hiding her face in my chest.

"It gets me every time," Bella mumbled, her voice muffled by my chest.

"The last few minutes were pure torture!" Pete said, looking over at me with wide, blood-shot eyes.

I nodded in agreement. "It was sad."

Bella picked her head up and frowned. "They loved each other so much!"

Surprisingly enough, I did feel slightly better after letting my sadness be put toward the movie instead of my own life. However, I knew once I left Bella's house, it would creep back on me.

We stayed at Bella's for a little while before Ross stood up and offered to drive Pete and me home. After dropping Pete off, Ross and I were silent in the car until he decided to speak up.

"Are you, like, depressed or something?" Ross asked as he drove down the road. I looked at him curiously.

"No," I answered honestly. Just because I had been sad doesn't mean that I had depression.

"You just seem out of it more often than usual," he told me. "Is it because of what happened?" he asked, referencing me getting beat up.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "No, it's not about that."

"Then what is it about? Because we're all worried about you," Ross said seriously.

For a moment I wondered what it would be like if I just told him. What if I just told him I was gay? That I liked Sam? I couldn't imagine he would think of me any different, but I was still apprehensive. I hadn't even labeled myself as gay until now and the thought was so scary that I didn't think I would ever be able to say it out loud.

"Ross, I–" I started. And I swear I almost said it. I almost let it slip out. "I'm just stressed and tired."

I could feel tears forming in my eyes. I was so pathetic. I couldn't even say that small, insignificant, three letter word. I wished I could tell him, that I could admit it, but I was too weak.

"Well, you can talk to me, man," Ross said, pulling up to my house. "About anything."

I let out a brief reply before leaving his car and storming into my house. Nathan was sitting alone in the living room as I hurriedly walked by him, hoping he wouldn't notice me.

"Mase?" he asked, turning around to face me as I made my way to the stairs.

I didn't pay him any mind. I just had to get to my room, then I could cry all I wanted, but I would *not* do it in front of Nathan.

Before I could make it up the stairs, Nathan grabbed a hold of my arm and pulled me to face him. I kept my head down, not wanting him to see my teary eyes and red face. My vision was blurred and my eyes felt heavy. I just wanted to get to my room.

"What's wrong?" Nathan asked worriedly.

I harshly pulled myself out of his grasp and continued my trek up the stairs. Unfortunately, Nathan followed me and shoved his way through my door before I could close it. I threw myself down onto my bed face-first and finally let the tears flow.

"What happened?" Nathan asked quickly in a concerned voice. "Are you hurt?"

He sat down on my bed and forcefully pushed me to turn me around. I took in a deep, ragged breath and sobbed, tears running down my face.

"I don't want to talk to you!" I croaked out.

Nathan held my shoulders firmly so I couldn't turn away from him. His face was pulled into a look of concern, his eyes wide and filled with worry. He put his face in front of mine, trying to get me to look at him.

"I just want to make sure you're alright," he said calmly.

"Do I look alright?" I asked back harshly. "I'm pathetic!"

Nathan wildly shook his head. "No you're not. You're not pathetic."

"Yes I am! I can't even say it!" I exclaimed, letting out another sob.

"Why do you think that? What can't you say?" Nathan asked, shaking me slightly.

"I can't say it," I said, shaking my head.

"Mase, whatever it is you can tell me," Nathan urged. "You're not pathetic, you–"

Before I could stop myself, I had finally gotten the courage to do what I was trying to. However, it seemed less like courage and more like defeat or a lapse in judgment. I had wanted to say it out loud, but saying it out loud would make it too real and I wasn't sure if I was ready to accept it. But it was too late.

"I'm gay, Nathan!"

Once the words had left my mouth, it was like the whole world stopped. Nathan froze, his eyes widening in shock and his grip on my shoulders

loosened. I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath before trying to release myself from Nathan's grasp.

"Let me go," I mumbled weakly, tears continuing to stream down my face.

"Mase–"

"Let me go!" I screamed, but his hands stayed firmly on me and his grip tightened again.

"Listen to me," Nathan said sternly. "You are not pathetic. So you're gay? I don't understand why you're crying about that."

I rolled my eyes and tried shoving him. "Shut up, I know what you put on Sam's car. I know how you feel about *fags* ."

Nathan visibly winced at my words, but then shook his head.

"I didn't mean it," Nathan defended. "I was just trying to get to him. If I knew you were–"

"You shouldn't have had to know about me!" I yelled back.

Nathan nodded. "You're right. It was stupid."

I furiously wiped my eyes as Nathan moved to rub my back soothingly. I breathed deeply as I willed to stop crying.

"Listen," Nathan started, grabbing my attention. "I love you, okay?"

I nodded as he pulled me to his side in a hug. I buried my face into his chest as my last few tears fell. Nathan held me tightly almost as if he never wanted to let me go.

"Does anyone else know?" Nathan asked quietly. I lifted my head up to look at him while he still kept his arms around me.

"Just you and a guy I've been with–"

"You've been with a guy?" Nathan interjected, looking troubled.

I smacked his chest in annoyance. "I'm gay, yes I've been with a guy."

"Did he hurt you? Is that why you were so upset?" he asked fiercely.

"No, I–"

"Because I swear to God I will beat the shit–"

"Nathan, stop," I stopped him, giving him an annoyed look.

"What? I'm not going to let some guy hurt you," he said seriously.

I rolled my eyes. "I can handle myself with him."

The thought of Nathan knowing who I had been with was scarier than admitting I was gay. I would never hear the end of it. I didn't know if Nathan would ever forgive me if I told him about Sam, and I respected Sam enough to not out him to my brother.

"Who is it?" he asked curiously, raising an eyebrow.

I gave him a stern look. "I can't tell you."

Nathan sighed, but nodded anyway.

"It's not Ross or Pete, right?" he asked, his voice filled with hope.

I let out a loud laugh. "No, not a chance."

Nathan chuckled and let out a relieved breath. "Good. So they don't know?"

I shook my head. "You're the only one I've actually told."

Nathan nodded and smiled to himself. "I know it probably didn't happen the way you wanted it to, but I'm really glad you told me."

"Honestly? I feel relieved," I told him. "I didn't let myself label my sexuality for so long because I was afraid, but now I know it, I know who I am."

Nathan's smile widened and he pulled me closer to his side. I couldn't help but throw my arm around him in a hug. There was no one on this Earth I trusted more than Nathan. We didn't always get along and he has made some questionable decisions, but we have been together since before we were born. I knew I would never have this type of connection with anyone else.

"So, are you with that guy still?" Nathan asked as we pulled away from each other.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It didn't work out."

"But you wish it did," Nathan added, clearly reading my thoughts.

I sighed. "Yeah, I guess."

"So why don't you just make it work?"

I threw my head back slightly. "I can't just make it work."

"Sure you can," he said. "If you want it bad enough you can."

I shook my head, looking back at him. "I don't think he wants me anymore."

"Why wouldn't he? You're a catch!" Nathan said, gesturing toward me.

I chuckled and took in a deep breath. "Because I told him we couldn't be together and now he's with someone else."

Nathan gave me a confused look and hit me on the back of the head.

"Why the hell would you tell him that?" he asked me incredulously.

I let out a deep breath and lied back on my bed. It would be so much easier to explain to him if I could tell him the complete truth.

"Dude," Nathan started, leaning over me. "You need to get your man."

If only he knew who my "man" was. He would never be encouraging me to get him back.

"Yeah, yeah," I brushed him off.

Nathan stood up, causing me to sit up to look up him.

"Let me know if you need my help," he said with a wink before stepping out of my room and closing the door.

I let out a sigh as the door shut. It felt like a weight had been taken off of my shoulders. It made me think about Sam. Should I risk being with him? I didn't know the answer to that. All I knew is that I wanted to risk it.

**

Thank you to @Grand_ for the incredible cover that I have attached! Everyone please take a look :)

ALSO, I'm working on some casting. I wanted to have it done by this update, but I didn't want to withhold the chapter any longer from you guys since I'm not finished with the casting. I'm going to continue working on that and hopefully have it done by Friday :) Please let me know what you think of the chapter!

What do you think about Mason coming out to Nathan? Did you expect Nathan's reaction?

23

Mason Maloney

"You're going to Tony's tonight, right?" Nathan asked when I saw him at the end of the day before he went to practice.

"Probably," I answered. "Bella and Pete really want to go."

Nathan nodded. "Do you have a DD?"

"Probably Ross," I told him.

"You can stay at Tony's with me if you need to," Nathan offered.

"I think I'll be fine," I assured him. "But thanks."

And with that, Nathan walked off down the hallway toward the locker room. Nathan hadn't brought up my confession since yesterday, but it was obvious that he was trying his hardest to be supportive as he kept his eye on me all day.

I turned on my heel and went out to the parking lot in search of Ross. It didn't take long to find him as he stood outside his car, talking to a girl from his chemistry class.

"Hey," I greeted as I approached them.

"Hi, Mason!" the girl, Liza, exclaimed happily.

I had rarely ever spoken to Liza, but I knew she was a fairly outgoing and pleasant person, pretty much the opposite of Ross.

I smiled kindly at her before looking to Ross who looked slightly uncomfortable, a slight tint of pink on his cheeks as he shifted on his feet.

"Will I see you guys at Tony's tonight?" Liza asked brightly.

"I think so," I answered, looking to Ross for confirmation. He just nodded.

"Great!" Liza said. "I'll see you guys later!"

Liza pulled Ross into a quick hug before turning on her heel and walking toward her car. The two of us watched her leave for a few moments before I turned to Ross with a coy smile on my face.

"Liza, huh?" I said teasingly.

Ross rolled his eyes, opening the driver's door and sliding in. I copied him, my smirk not leaving my face.

"You like her," I said, as if stating a fact.

"It's nothing," Ross said, waving me off and putting the car in reverse.

"Ross!" I exclaimed. "It's not nothing! You like her."

"She's cool," he admitted as he coasted through the parking lot.

"She's also pretty, and nice, and smart," I trailed with a grin.

"Sounds like you like her," he mumbled.

I just rolled my eyes.

Ross sighed and glanced at me briefly. "I think she's into me."

"That's great!" I said.

"But I don't know how I feel about her," he continued.

My face fell. "Why?"

"I just don't think I want a relationship," Ross told me with a shrug.

I rolled my eyes. "You haven't dated in forever."

"And that didn't work out," he reminded me.

"Maybe this will," I encouraged him. "Liza's cool. I think you should go for it."

"You haven't dated in a while either," Ross said with his eyebrow raised, taking the attention off of him.

I instantly felt uncomfortable, sinking back in my seat and looking out the window. I didn't know if I would call what happened between Sam and me "dating" but it was something like that. Not that Ross needed to know about that.

"Anyway," Ross started. "Bella would probably throw a fit if I started dating Liza."

I rolled my eyes. "Who cares?"

"I don't want to deal with that," he said. "She likes that we're all single right now. If I got into a relationship before her, she would be pissed."

"She'd get over it," I said. "She would realize it's bitchy and selfish of her."

"Yeah, she would realize that *after* she flipped out," Ross said as we made our way down the street to his house.

I shook my head. "Don't base your decisions on Bella's reactions. We know she's irrational."

While I loved Bella and she was one of my best friends, she tended to be a bit self-centered at times. That was why it was good to have someone like Pete to knock her down, even if he went too far sometimes. My relationship with her was less strained now that she had stopped her conquest of Sam. I just hoped that she would stay away from him for good.

Ross pulled the car into his driveway and the two of us got out and headed inside his house. Neither of his parents were home and his older sister was

away at college, so we would have the house to ourselves until Pete decided to show up.

"How much you want to bet Pete gets smashed before the football game?" Ross joked as we settled onto the couch.

I laughed. "I can't bet against you because I agree with you."

As if on cue, Pete waltzed into Ross's house, holding a bottle of liquor in each hand and a wide smile on his face. He raised his eyebrows and gestured toward each bottle.

"I got the stuff!" he said, placing the bottles on the coffee table and taking a seat beside me.

"Where did you even get that?" Ross asked in a confused tone.

"My brother got it," Pete replied, grabbing one of the bottles to open it.

"Don't you think it's kinda early?" I asked hesitantly.

Pete gave me a strange look as if he was thinking I was crazy.

"We need to pregame, dude, you know this," he answered before taking a swig of the liquor, grimacing as he swallowed it.

Pete handed off the bottle to me and I looked to Ross who gestured for me to go ahead. I took a sip from the bottle and my tongue instantly burned. I choked down the liquid and held the bottle out to look at the label.

"Why are you having me drink straight vodka?" I asked, handing the bottle back to Pete.

He held the bottle up. "It doesn't have to taste good to do the trick."

"What's the other one?" I asked.

Pete took another sip of the vodka before looking toward the other bottle.

"Tequila," he said casually.

My face scrunched up in disgust. "Gross."

"The taste doesn't matter!" Pete insisted as he took another gulp of the vodka.

I glanced over at Ross and the two of us shared a knowing look. We knew we were going to have to take care of Pete, and probably Bella, tonight.

"Just slow down and take it easy, alright?" Ross said, shaking his head.

Pete shook his head. "You can't tame me."

Ross and I shared another look and sighed together.

It was going to be a *long* night.

***

By the time we arrived at Tony's house later that night, the party was already in full swing. Quite a few people were out in the front yard, walking up to the house, but it was easy to tell most of the party was inside due to the cold weather.

Pete wasn't as drunk as I thought he was going to be upon arriving since Ross made him sober up during the football game. However, as soon as we stepped inside, Pete had a drink in his hand as he greeted some people in the kitchen.

"Hey!" I heard a voice call. I turned around to see Christo with a wide smile on his face and a beer can in hand. He walked over to me and tossed his arm around my shoulder.

"The cake looks great, dude, thanks so much," he said to me, gesturing toward the cake on the kitchen table.

I nodded and smiled slightly. "I just sketched out the design, the owner, Charlene, decorated it."

"Either way, it's awesome," Christo responded, swaying slightly and causing me to stumble a bit.

"I'm glad," I responded, putting my hand on his side to steady him.

"Have you heard from Sam?" he asked, looking around the kitchen.

I shook my head hastily. "No."

"That asshole never gave me a straight answer about whether he was coming," Christo explained.

I didn't know if I was prepared to see Sam in a social setting. The last time we had spoken, he had said that the only thing between us was work. I had since come to find that I wanted something more with him and it was messing with my head. I wanted Sam here to tell him how I felt, but I knew I would never have the courage to initiate a conversation with him. Not after what happened between us the other day.

"I'm sure he'll show up," Christo added before releasing me. "Go get a beer. Have some fun, Little Maloney."

Christo swayed off through the kitchen, bumping fists with a few guys he walked by. I noticed he walked up to Jake and Owen who both seemed to be more sober than he was. I made brief eye contact with Jake before turning to look for Ross.

Ross stood against the wall near the staircase, smirking as he spoke with Liza. I couldn't hold back a groan when I realized I couldn't disturb them. Although Ross said he didn't want a relationship with her, I knew he was just trying to convince himself of that. If he got the opportunity with Liza, I was sure he would take it.

I walked out toward the living room and saw that Pete was sitting on a recliner with a girl in his lap and a beer in his hand. I rolled my eyes and turned around to walk out, hoping to find Bella somewhere. I made my way down the stairs to the basement. It was more crowded than I thought it would be, but there was significantly less people than there was upstairs.

My eyes landed on Nathan who was currently in the middle of a game of beer pong with Tony, Rick, and Hayden.

"Hey, Mase," Nathan called out as Tony took his shot. I made my way over to my brother.

"Have you seen Bella?" I asked, leaning closer to him so he could hear me.

He nodded. "She was down here earlier. She said she wanted to play pong."

I looked around the room and found her sitting in a circle with a bunch of girls and a few guys. I bid Nathan a goodbye before walking over to her.

"Mase!" Bella exclaimed happily, clearly not sober.

"Hey," I greeted, taking a seat beside her. Her friend Wendy stared at me from across the circle, sending me a shy wave to which I returned.

"Are you going to be on my pong team?" Bella asked me, gripping onto my arm and leaning her head on my shoulder.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not drinking tonight."

"Boo!" Bella said in disappointment. "I bet your brother would be a better pong partner anyway."

I chuckled slightly. "You're not wrong."

Not long after, Nathan walked over to tell Bella that it was her turn for pong. She stood up excitedly, stumbling as she did so. Nathan held onto her arms to steady her before she looped her arm through his and let him lead her to the pong table. Most of the group got up to go watch the game and left me alone with Wendy and two other girls. I smiled awkwardly at them before standing up and heading toward the basement stairs. The last thing I wanted to do was watch Bella be embarrassingly bad at beer pong and hang all over my brother.

When I reached the top of the stairs in the kitchen, my eyes instantly fell on Sam. I stopped short and held my breath, as if I didn't expect him to be here.

He looked good, like he always did. His hair was pushed back messily and he wore a plain white t-shirt with a dark blue flannel over it that hugged his broad shoulders perfectly.

I was knocked out of my trance when people coming up from the basement nudged me out of the way. My feet started moving toward the kitchen before I could stop them. Did I really want to talk to Sam? Did I even know what to say? I was about to turn around before a voice stopped me.

"Hey Little Maloney!" Christo exclaimed before I could make my escape. I winced as Sam's eyes met mine.

Sam's green eyes seemed to be another wonder of the world. They were easy to get lost in and hard to look away from.

Christo beckoned me over and I slowly dragged my feet to where Sam stood with his friends, trying to look away from him but failing miserably.

"Did you have a drink yet?" Christo asked, lifting his beer can as I stopped in front of him.

I shook my head. "No."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Christo yelled, turning to grab a beer out of the cooler on the floor beside him.

I held my hands up to stop him. "I'm not drinking tonight."

"Come on, just–"

"He said no, leave it at that," Sam snapped, cutting him off. My eyes snapped to him and gave him a small smile to thank him. Sam nodded in acknowledgment.

"You two are boring," Christo said, giving us a thumbs down.

I averted my eyes and looked around the room, trying to find some excuse to leave the group of guys in the kitchen. Ross and Pete were nowhere in

sight and I was stuck when Christo threw his arm around me like he had before.

"We should hang out more, Little Maloney," Christo said, his face getting close to mine.

I knew I must have looked uncomfortable with Christo's close proximity because Jake started laughing with his beer can on his lips while Owen was looking at us with an amused expression. I looked at Sam to see his blank stare as his eyes zeroed in on Christo.

"He's an affectionate drunk," Jake explained, gesturing toward his friend that was holding onto me.

"I can tell," I said. "This is the second time tonight he's been on me."

Jake let out a loud laugh at that. It was the first time I had seen him truly at ease and I was sure the alcohol was to thank for that.

"Little Maloney is my friend, Jake. Don't laugh at him," Christo said, gripping onto me tighter.

"I'm laughing at you," Jake responded before taking another sip of beer.

"Well, that's not nice either," Christo replied.

I tried moving out of Christo's grasp, but he only tightened his arms around me when I did. It was like the more I struggled, the tighter he held me. All I wanted to do was get away from Sam's scrutinizing gaze.

"Jesus Christ, Christo! Let him go!" Sam exclaimed loudly.

Sam's yell caused Christo to jump away from me, spilling his beer on me in the process.

"Look what you made me do!" Christo yelled, gesturing toward my wet t-shirt.

Sam rolled his eyes and walked over to me, gripping my arm. I gave him a strange look when he started pulling me out of the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" I asked and he led me throw a crowd of people.

"Getting you cleaned up," he replied.

He led me to the upstairs bathroom where there was no one around. As soon as the two of us were in the room, he shut the door and locked it. I looked up at him as he pulled his flannel off, his eyes never leaving mine as he did.

"Take your shirt off," Sam demanded lightly.

I did as he said, the smell of alcohol filling my nose as I pulled my soaked t-shirt over my head. I felt exposed in front of Sam as he looked over my half-naked body. I crossed my arms over my chest briefly before Sam grabbed my arms to put them back by my side. He put his flannel over my shoulders, causing me to stick my arms in the sleeves. Sam stood closely to me and kept his eyes on my face as he buttoned up the flannel. I could feel his warm and heavy breath hitting my cheeks.

The flannel was too big for me, the sleeves going well-past my hands. The shoulders were too broad and it hung low on me. However, I still liked the way I looked in it. I liked that it was obviously Sam's and it was easy to tell by even our slight size difference.

My eyes were on the floor before I slowly looked up to see that Sam was already looking at me. He looked down at the shirt on my torso before looking back to my face.

"It looks good on you," he said in a raspy voice.

"Thanks," I replied timidly in a whisper.

I wanted him to kiss me. I thought he was going to kiss me. He didn't.

"Can we talk?" Sam asked, moving away from me to lean against the sink.

I thought about it for a moment. This was what I wanted. I wanted the opportunity to tell him how I felt. But what if he wanted to tell me that he didn't want to see me anymore? What if he was going to tell me something that would be sure to hurt me? I decided it was worth the risk. The only way to stop feeling so unsure and insecure was to talk to him. I needed to hear what he had to say, so I nodded.

"Sure," I said. "Let's talk."

**

Sorry this update is a little later than usual! I had to work all day and had to finish the cast before I could post this. If you don't want to see the cast, you don't have to go look at it and you can continue picturing the characters as you wish.

The cast is just to give you a general idea about how I see the characters, but you do not need to picture them the way I do.

Please let me know what you think of the chapter!

What did you think about the party? Any theories on how the talk with Mason and Sam will go?

24

Mason Maloney

Sam and I sat in silence for a few minutes, the only noise was the sound of the music coming through the walls from downstairs. I moved away from Sam and sat on the closed toilet seat, looking down at the floor. Neither of us said anything. It was like we were both waiting on each other to start talking. If he didn't go first, then we were going to be waiting forever.

"I broke things off with Mercedes," he finally said, turning his gaze to me.

My eyes widened in surprise at his words. He looked at me with a serious expression as if willing me to say something.

"Oh," was all I could think of.

Of course, I was happy that he was no longer seeing her, but it didn't stop my confusion as to why he stopped seeing her. I didn't know if I was just getting my hopes up thinking it was for me. Sam just nodded, not saying anything else.

"Why?" I asked in a spurt of courage.

"I had a talk with my brother," he said. "He made me realize some things."

My stomach fluttered with nerves and my head spun, making me dizzy.

"Like what?" I muttered quietly.

"That nothing should be able to stop me from being with the person I want to be with," Sam explained, looking straight into my eyes.

I was stunned, my mouth parted in awe. My heart skipped a beat then continued to pound wildly in my chest as if trying to break free and give itself to Sam. I wanted him to have my heart, he could take it.

"It made me realize," he continued, "that the one person I thought I couldn't have, is the only one I want and that if I wanted that person enough, nothing could stop me."

I stared at him before looking to the floor with a smile on my face.

"That's funny," I said with a light chuckled.

Sam looked puzzled. "What's funny?"

"I had a similar conversation with Nathan yesterday," I admitted, looking back up at him.

"You did?" Sam asked in a surprised tone, his eyes widening slightly.

I nodded, my smile widening. "I didn't tell him about us, but I told him that there was someone."

"And what did he say?" Sam asked, titling his head to the side.

"Basically the same thing," I told him.

Sam nodded. "Interesting."

We stayed silent for a few more moments before Sam left his spot at the sink and came to stand in front of me. I looked up at him, my face filled with hope as he grabbed a hold of my hand.

"I want us to try again," he said. "And be serious this time."

"Like, be exclusive?" I asked timidly.

Sam nodded. "Yeah."

"I think that's your best idea yet," I answered with a smile to which Sam returned.

"I'm full of good ideas," he boasted.

I rolled my eyes and stood up, Sam's hand still in mine.

"We should probably keep it quiet until after football season," I suggested, looking down at our hands.

"You're right," Sam agreed. "That'll save us from at least some of the drama."

I looked up at him, my smile growing wide as my eyes settled on his face. He was always handsome, but in this moment he looked even better. Sam's smile matched mine as he leaned down close to my face and pressed his lips against mine.

The kiss was slow and sweet, only our lips meeting. Out of all the times I kissed Sam, this time was my favorite. There was no uncertainty about what it meant or confusion about how I felt.

Sam pulled away slightly, resting his forehead on mine with shallow breaths. My eyes stayed closed as Sam moved his hand to caress the back of my neck as if making sure I wouldn't leave him.

"We should probably get back downstairs," Sam said in a whisper. I just nodded in agreement. "Come stay at my house tonight."

I opened my eyes and pulled away from Sam to get a better look at his face. He was looking at me with a serious expression, waiting for my response to his invitation.

"Okay," I said with a nod. Sam smiled and gave me one last kiss before taking my hand and leading me out of the bathroom, my soiled shirt in his other hand.

When we got to the stairs, Sam dropped my hand, but I made sure to stay close to him as we maneuvered through the crowd of drunken teenagers. We quickly made our way back to Sam's friends who were exactly where they were when we left them "Little Maloney! Hey!" Christo greeted enthusiastically, throwing his arm around my shoulder.

Sam was quick to shove him off of me and stand between the two of us.

"Do *not* spill more beer on anyone," Sam warned, pointing a finger at Christo.

"Maybe he has a crush on him or something," Jake laughed, taking a sip from his beer. Owen laugh along loudly while Sam and I each sent Jake a deadpanned look.

"Why don't you have a drink in your hand?" Christo asked me, leaning closely toward Sam.

"You already asked him that, dipshit," Owen said, shaking his head.

"Why do you guys hate me?" Christo whined dramatically.

Sam rolled his eyes and leaned closer to me while Jake and Owen gave Christo looks of annoyance and disbelief.

"Because you're stupid," Jake answered.

Christo huffed dramatically before taking another beer out of the cooler on the floor. Tony came from behind him and clapped a hand on his shoulder before taking the beer from his hand.

"Tony! Hey!" Christo greeted, not even acknowledging his missing beer.

Tony smiled widely at his cousin, throwing an arm around his shoulders. He turned and nodded at me in acknowledgment to which I mimicked his action. Nathan and Rick followed Tony soon after, Nathan placing himself between Sam and me.

"What the hell are you wearing?" Nathan asked, gesturing toward Sam's too-big shirt covering my body.

"Christo spilled beer on me," I told him, leaning close to his ear so I wouldn't have to yell over the crowd noise. Nathan turned to shoot Christo a dirty look. "It was an accident," I assured him.

"Why are you hanging around with them?" Nathan asked me quietly, leaning closely to my ear.

I rolled my eyes and sent him an annoyed look. I looked past my brother to see that Sam stood stiffly, looking uncomfortable at the presence of my brother and his friends.

I looked back to Nathan. "I just came to say hi and then Christo got beer on me so I needed a shirt."

Nathan looked me up and down before averting his eyes to Sam, looking down at his hands to see him still holding my beer-soaked shirt. Knowing he couldn't cause a scene here, Nathan stayed quiet, but I could tell by the bothered look on his face that he wanted to flip out.

"You need to go eat cake! It's your birthday!" Christo shouted, grabbing my attention. He had his right pointer finger buried in Tony's chest as he used him for support to stay standing.

"I will," Tony said to appease him.

"Let's go then!" Christo insisted, grabbing Tony's arm to pull him further into the kitchen.

Tony looked to Nathan and Rick as his cousin pulled him away, as if telling them to follow him. Rick nudged Nathan on the arm before going after Tony. Nathan lingered for a few moments, looking between Sam and me, before heading off in the direction of his friends.

"Maloney always has a stick up his ass," Jake commented, shaking his head.

I gave him an annoyed look to which he just shrugged and stared back as if daring me to argue with him.

"He is an ass," Owen agreed. "But apparently his season is going really good. I mean *really* good."

I looked to Sam to see that he wasn't paying attention as he absentmindedly looked around the crowded kitchen.

"I bet Sam's got him beat though," Jake countered, looking to Sam. "Right, dude?"

Sam's attention snapped to Jake. "Hm?"

"You've got Maloney beat this season, right?" he asked again.

Sam looked to me then back to Jake and shrugged. "We'll see."

I was grateful for him for not bashing my brother in front of me. I knew he probably did when he was around his friends, but I was glad that he took my feelings into consideration when it came to Nathan. He knew I hated talking about him with the Knights and wouldn't further the conversation while I was around.

Jake and Owen continued talking about football while Sam leaned over to me, the two of us not paying attention to his friends. He looked at them briefly before moving his mouth closer to my ear.

"Do you want to get out of here soon?" he asked, his breath warm on my skin.

I just nodded, looking up at him. I was eager to leave with him so that I could spend private time with him without any worry about who might see.

"I'm heading out," Sam announced to his friends, halting their conversation.

"So soon?" Owen asked curiously.

"Yeah, you know I have somewhere to be tomorrow," Sam answered casually.

"Hey, can you give me a ride home?" I asked him so it wouldn't be weird if we left together.

Catching onto what I was doing, Sam answered with a nod. "Sure."

"Take care of Christo tonight," Sam said to his friends as we were getting ready to leave.

"Yeah, yeah," Jake waved him off, grabbing another beer from the cooler.

The two of us quickly walked out of the kitchen and through the living room to get to the front door. I noticed Ross was still talking to Liza, so instead of bothering him, I sent him a quick text.

Getting a ride home from Sam

Sam's car was a little ways down Tony's long driveway. He looked behind us as if looking for someone before he grabbed my hand and pulled me along. I smiled down at our connected hands as I followed him. Sam released my hand as the two of us approached his car and got in. We didn't say anything for a few moments as Sam began to drive.

"Are you sure it's okay for us to go to your house?" I asked, looking over at him. He had one arm resting on the back of my seat while he used the other to steer. I had begun to realize that seeing him drive with one hand was not only inexplicably attractive, but one of my weaknesses.

Sam moved his hand from my seat down to my knee and I instantly felt the heat where he touched me. It was an act of intimacy that I didn't know I craved until he had done it.

"It's fine," he assured me. "Jonah and Mae are out and the kids are with their grandparents."

He rubbed his thumb over my knee comfortingly as I looked down at his hand with a smile. It felt as though I was finally getting what I wanted. My mind was clear from confusion and having Sam by my side was heartening.

We arrived at Sam's house shortly after. All of the lights in the house were off and there was only one lonesome car in the driveway until Sam pulled in. My confidence grew as the two of us exited the car and made our way to the house. I didn't know what I expected from my night with Sam, but I knew what I wanted. I just hoped he wanted the same thing.

As soon as we were in the house with the door shut, Sam's lips were on mine. He pushed me up against the door with a hand on the back of my neck and the other caressing my hip. I immediately responded to the kiss, opening my mouth as his tongue met mine. The kiss was rough and more sensual than the kiss in the bathroom. While that one was filled with apprehension and hope, this one was filled with relief and lust.

Sam's hand on my hip moved upward toward my chest and started undoing the buttons on the flannel. My arms wrapped around Sam's neck, pulling his face closer and deepening the kiss. Once Sam had the shirt completely unbuttoned, he placed a hand on my chest, still leaving the shirt on.

He pulled away from my lips and moved his mouth down my jaw and neck. I rested my head back on the door, my chest heaving as I breathed heavily. Sam's lips on my skin felt electrifying, keeping me surged and ready for whatever would come next.

"Let's go upstairs," Sam whispered, his lips touching my ear. He continued kissing my jaw until I answered.

I eagerly nodded, causing him to pull away from me. His green eyes looked wild as he looked me up and down. Sam held his hand out for me and I took it before he began pulling me toward the stairs. Sam moved quickly on the steps, pulling me, but I couldn't keep up. I stumbled slightly on the steps, causing Sam to slow down and look back at me.

The two of us were thrown into a fit of giggles as Sam struggled to pull me up the stairs, my laughter hindering my movements. Eventually, we clumsily made it to his room. Instead of stopping at the door like we did downstairs, Sam brought me directly to his bed, pulling the flannel off of my body.

Sam lied back on his bed so that I was straddling him. I brought my lips down onto his as I stuck my hands underneath his shirt, feeling his defined abs.

Sam shivered. "Your hands are freezing," he mumbled against my lips.

I smirked and continued kissing him, moving my hands further up his body and pulling his shirt up with them, playing with the chain of his necklace with my fingers. Eventually Sam got the message and sat up to pull his shirt off. I kissed down his neck and his chest, nipping and sucking at his warm skin. Sam let out an attractive, frustrated moan before grabbing me by the hips and turning us over so that I was underneath him.

While I thought my nerves would get the better of me at this stage, the exact opposite happened. My confidence skyrocketed as Sam looked down at me with an appreciative look on his face as if he was admiring me. He made me feel *sexy* and I had never felt that way before.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Sam asked as he hovered above me with his necklace dangling in front of my face, the wild look in his eyes dying down as he expressed genuine concern for me.

"Yes," I answered quickly. "Yes, I want to do this."

"And you're okay with," he paused, "you know."

"Yes, I'm okay with bottoming," I replied with a chuckle. "Unless you're offering."

Sam's eyes widened in a panic. "Um, well I–"

I let out a loud laugh, throwing my head back slightly. "I'm just fucking with you, Sam. Relax."

Sam smiled widely down at me and playfully shook his head, placing a chaste kiss on my cheek.

"You have to tell me if you want to stop," Sam demanded in a stern voice, a serious look on his face. "Like if you even feel slightly uncomfortable."

I rolled my eyes. "I'll be fine."

"I'm serious," he argued pointedly.

"So am I," I responded, starting to unbutton my pants. Sam swatted my hands away.

"We don't have to," Sam offered kindly.

"Are you okay with doing this?" I asked, my confidence seeming to die down. Sam's apprehension was causing me to second guess myself.

"I'm more than okay with this, trust me," Sam confirmed. "I haven't stopped thinking about this since the first time we kissed."

I smirked. "Then let's do this."

Sam's handsome smirk matched mine as he finally seemed to give in. I could barely see his face in the dark room, but the light of his eyes was enough to see his defined features. His green eyes sparked, looking wild once again as he moved his hands to my unbuttoned jeans. His eyes didn't leave mine as he finished taking them off.

Soon enough, we were moaning messes connected as one like we desired. And no outside force could keep us from each other again.

***

I awoke from the sound of a door opening. My eyes didn't open, feeling as though it wasn't time for me to wake up yet. Sam's bare chest was warm on my back as he held me to him from behind. I felt his breath on the back of my neck where his head rested.

"Oh, sorry," a voice said, causing my eyes to snap open.

Jonah stood in the doorway looking stunned. His eyes were widened and his mouth was parted slightly in shock. His feet stayed planted on the ground as if they were unable to move and he scratched the back of his neck nervously.

My eyes were bugging out of my head and I was stunned into being completely still. After a few moments of having a stare down with Jonah, I tried to release myself from Sam's grip, but he still clung tightly to me.

"Sam," I said, smacking his hand that was around me.

He muttered incoherent words against the back of my neck, tightening his hold on me.

"Sam," Jonah called out.

His hands released me almost instantly, leaving me cold despite the heat of my embarrassment.

**

Can't believe I forgot to say happy pride month in the last update!

Happy Pride Month!

Thank you for all of the reads, comments, and votes!

What did you think about Sam and Mason getting together? Any predictions about how Jonah is going to react?

25

Sam Knight

The sound of my brother's voice calling out to me caused me to spring awake. I pulled myself from Mason and sat up in complete shock. Jonah stared at me with a look of confusion and embarrassment. My mouth parted, not knowing what to say.

"Um," I uttered, looking down at Mason who had pulled the covers over his head.

"I'll give you a minute," Jonah said, moving to leave my bedroom. "But I'd like to talk to you, Sam."

I nodded, not able to look him in the eye. Jonah left the room and tightly shut my door. As soon as he was gone, I buried my face in my hands and Mason threw the covers off, sitting up to stare at me.

"What the *fuck* ," Mason said exasperatedly, looking stressed out as his hands held his head between them.

"I know," I muttered. "I have no idea what I'm going to say to him." I shook my head, looking down at the scrunched up blanket in my lap.

Mason brought his hand to mine, pulling it down from my face and into his lap. He rubbed his thumb on the top of my hand comfortingly. I looked down at our hands and then back up at his face.

"It'll be fine," Mason assured me. "It's embarrassing as fuck, but it'll be fine."

I laughed and nodded in agreement before looking toward the door and letting out a sigh.

"I should probably go talk to him," I said, getting up from the bed in search for my discarded clothes. Mason sat up, the blanket pooled over his hips.

I pulled on my boxers and some sweats along with the white t-shirt I was wearing the night before, then left the room to find Jonah downstairs at the kitchen table with two cups of coffee in front of him. Wordlessly, I sat down across from him and took a cup in my hands, the heat burning my skin.

"So," Jonah started, taking a sip of his coffee. "Is... is Mason the one you were talking about?"

"What?" I asked.

"When you said you like someone, you were talking about Mason, weren't you?" Jonah repeated. I didn't even notice myself start nodding until Jonah mirrored my action.

"I know it's weird–" I started.

Jonah shook his head. "It's not weird," he cut me off.

I gave him a look of disbelief.

"It's unexpected," Jonah said. "Not weird."

I thought for a moment before saying anything. I didn't know how I expected Jonah to react to seeing me with a guy and I didn't know how I felt about his reaction. He was obviously uncomfortable. I could tell by his stiff stature and the firm grip he had on his coffee cup, but his face was oddly calm and casual.

"So, are you two together?" Jonah asked, sounding genuinely interested.

I smiled slightly down at my coffee. "Yeah, I think so."

"You think so?"

"I asked him to be with me, but we haven't put a title on it," I explained, looking up at my brother.

Jonah nodded. "You don't need a title, being together is enough."

"Yeah, I guess so," I answered, taking a sip of coffee, the steaming liquid nearly burning my throat.

"I'm happy for you," Jonah said, surprising me.

"You are?" I asked, astonished.

Jonah let out a loud laugh, throwing his head back. "Of course, I'm happy for you! You make it sound like I've never been happy for you in my life."

I chuckled lightly. "I just didn't think you'd want your brother to be gay or whatever I am. I don't even know."

His face contorted into a serious expression. "I don't care what you are, Sam, as long as you're happy."

It was new for Jonah and me to be having heart-to-heart conversations. The two of us usually only discussed football and had random small talk, so to have him be interested in my life and my happiness was a bit overwhelming. It wasn't a bad thing, it was just different. Neither of us were very sappy guys so this was probably the closest thing I would get to an "I love you" from him. I would take it.

"You know," he said after a few moments of silence. "If you two are going to be together, you're going to have to tell him about Mom."

I groaned, looking down at the table. The last thing I wanted to do was talk to Mason about my mother.

"I doubt it's a deal breaker for him, but you should be honest with him," Jonah told me in a serious tone. I liked to call it his dad voice.

"I will," I said. "Just not yet."

Jonah gave me a serious look, but didn't press the matter any further.

"We need to leave in half an hour," Jonah said, standing up from the table with his empty coffee cup.

I nodded and stood up with him, turning to leave the kitchen and go back to my room. When I entered my bedroom, Mason was pacing around the room in my flannel from last night and his boxers, talking angrily on the phone with who I could only assume was his brother.

Mason looked up at me as he answered Nathan. "Oh my God, chill out. I'll be home soon."

I sat on my bed, patting the spot next to me for Mason to take. He sat down and rested his head on my shoulder while I wrapped an arm around him.

"I'm telling you I'll be home soon," Mason argued into the phone. "I don't know! Like, within an hour maybe."

I could faintly hear Nathan's angry voice as he chastised his twin.

"Okay, I'm hanging up," Mason said before doing what he promised.

He sighed heavily and brought himself closer to me.

"How was your talk with Jonah?" he asked.

"Fine, he's cool," I answered, not wanting to get into the details. "Was that Nathan on the phone?"

"Yeah, he was freaking out because I left last night without telling him and then he went home this morning and I wasn't there," Mason explained. "He can act like my dad sometimes."

I laughed, holding him tighter. "So can Jonah."

Mason laughed with me before the two of us lapsed in silence for a few moments.

"I have to get going," I told him, causing him to pick his head up from my shoulder.

"You're the type to leave the morning after?" Mason asked teasingly.

I smirked and shoved his shoulder. "Fuck off."

Mason stood up, a smirk on his face. "Just saying, that's not very gentleman-like."

"You're annoying," I responded as he bent down to pick up his jeans from the night before.

He quickly pulled them on. "So are you, yet I still hang around with you."

"Oh please," I said, walking to him and placing my hand on his hip. "You think I'm charming."

"No," Mason said, point his finger at my chest and pushing me. " *You* think you're charming. The rest of the world knows you're annoying."

"You didn't think that last night," I teased with a smirk.

"Oh no, I did," he assured me. "You just also happen to be extremely sexy and that's hard to ignore."

I threw my head back and let out a loud laugh as Mason copied my actions. I moved away from him to change into jeans and a sweatshirt before the two of us went downstairs where Jonah and Mae were waiting for me in the living room.

"Hi, Mason," Mae greeted him with a hug. "I didn't know you were here."

I looked to Jonah, surprised he hadn't told Mae about what happened this morning.

"Mae," I called out as she released Mason. Everyone turned to me. "Mason is my boyfriend."

Mason smiled widely at me while Mae's mouth hung open in shock. She was silent for a few moments as if wondering if she heard me correctly. When I nodded at her, her shocked face turned to one of excitement.

"That's..." she started. "That's great! Is he coming with us today?"

"No," I quickly answered. "We are just going to drop him off at home."

The four of us got into Jonah's car and he started driving toward Mason's house with my directions.

"Nathan can't see you drop me off," Mason reminded me in a whisper.

"He won't recognize the car," I said, trying to calm him.

Mason contemplated for a moment before nodding.

"Where are you going today?" Mason asked the question I had hoped he wouldn't.

I sighed. "It's just a family thing. Don't worry about it."

He didn't look convinced but didn't say anything else. Eventually, we pulled up to his house and Mason was quick to try and get out of the car. Before he could leave, I grabbed him and pulled him in for a kiss.

"I'll see you later," I said, pulling away from him.

"Yeah..." he said. "Thanks for the ride."

And with that he scurried up his driveway and into his house before Jonah pulled away from the curb, luckily not being caught by Nathan.

"So, you and Mason, huh?" Mae teased, turning around in her seat and raising her eyebrows suggestively.

I rolled my eyes. "None of your business. We're not talking about it."

"We have an hour-long car ride to talk about it," she pointed out. "When did that even happen?"

"Last night," I answered.

"And you two had se–"

"Mae, I really don't want to hear about my brother's sex life," Jonah complained, cutting off his wife.

"But I'm so curious," she whined, facing him before turning back to me. "Anyway, Mason is super cute."

I chuckled and nodded in agreement. "He is."

Mae dropped the subject for the rest of the ride until we reached our destination.

"Are you going to tell her about Mason?" Mae asked as Jonah parked the car.

I thought about it for a moment before answering.

"Not yet."

***

Mason Maloney

"Where the hell have you been?" Nathan asked as soon as I walked in the door.

He stood against the doorway leading to the living room with his arms crossed as if he had been waiting for me to come home. He probably had been.

"I just stayed at a friend's house," I answered. "Stop freaking out."

"Don't tell me to stop freaking out!" he yelled. "I know you weren't with Ross or Pete so I had *no idea* where you went."

"I don't need to tell you everywhere I go!" I argued, trying to walk by him. Nathan caught me by the shoulder and held me in place.

"You can't just disappear like that," he said softly.

"You mean like how you disappear all the time and leave me stranded at work?" I shot back sarcastically, shrugging his hand off my shoulder.

"That's different," Nathan said.

"I'm failing to see how," I responded, crossing my arms over my chest.

"It's different because last night we were at a party with a bunch of drunk people," he started. "And a bunch of Knights were there. I didn't know if you got jumped by them or something."

Nathan's face showed concern which caused my annoyance to die down a bit. He was only worried about me, so I should probably stop being such an asshole about it.

"Sam took care of that, remember?" I reminded him.

Nathan rolled his eyes. "Excuse me for not completely trusting Sam Knight."

"He's not as bad as you think," I said before I could stop myself. The last thing I needed was for Nathan to get suspicious. God only knows what he would do if he found out about Sam and me. I don't think I would make it out of this house alive if he were to find out.

"Whatever, just don't disappear on me again," Nathan said.

"And you do the same," I said with my eyebrows raised.

Nathan rolled his eyes again. "Fine, whatever."

I tried to walk by Nathan, but he stopped me again. I gave him an annoyed, questioning look.

"So who were you with last night?" he asked. "Were you with your man?"

I scoffed, pushing past Nathan to make my way up to my room to which he followed me close to my heels. Once I arrived at my room, I tried to shut the door as quickly as possible to keep Nathan out, but he pushed his way through and took a seat on my bed.

"I don't remember inviting you in here," I said in an annoyed tone, standing in front of Nathan where he sat.

"You have an open-door policy," he reminded me with his eyebrows raised.

"Not for when you're going to just ask me questions that I'm not going to answer," I replied, gesturing toward the door to try and get him to leave.

Nathan rolled his eyes. "I just want to know if you were with your guy."

"None of your business," I said, sitting beside him on the bed.

"I'm going to take that as a yes," he warned, a slight smirk on his face.

"Take it how you want," I told him casually.

"Did you get lucky?" Nathan asked teasingly.

"Shut up," I muttered, lying back on my bed.

"I'm taking that as a yes too," he said, looking down at me.

"I don't care," I said.

The truth of the matter was Nathan would believe whatever he wanted, regardless of what I told him. There was no point in trying to convince him otherwise, although he *was* right in assuming I "got lucky."

"I bet you have a ton of hickeys on your chest like last time," Nathan joked teasingly, letting out a chuckle.

I sat up, giving him a deadpanned look before crossing my arms over my chest.

"I'm done talking to you," I said, leaning over to grab my copy of *Pride and Prejudice* .

Nathan took the book from me and flipped through the pages, shaking his head.

"I should've known you were gay when I saw the amount of girly books you read," he said, looking at the back cover.

I snatched the book from his hands. "Being able to read past a fifth grade level is not an indicator of being gay."

Nathan shot me an annoyed look, his eyes slightly squinted. "You're hilarious," he said sarcastically, standing up from my bed.

I sent him a questioning look as he made his way to my door to exit the room.

"I'm leaving," he said as he reached the door.

"Where are you going?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Nathan looked at me with an expression of annoyance, tilting his head slightly to the side.

"Are you really going to start this?" he asked as if in disbelief.

"You're the one that started it when you flipped out at me for disappearing," I pointed out. "Where are you going?"

He rolled his eyes and leaned against the doorway. "I'm hanging out with Rick and Hayden," he answered.

"No Tony?"

"He's going to have such a bad hangover, I would be surprised to see him functioning by Monday," Nathan said before leaving my room and tightly shutting the door.

Instead of dwelling on my conversation with Nathan, I opened my book and quickly got lost in Jane Austen's words.

**

Hi everyone! Sorry this update is a little later than usual!

Thanks for all of the reads, comments, and votes!

What did you think about Jonah's reaction? Any theories about where Sam and his family went afterwards?

Let me know what you think!

26

Mason Maloney

"Why is everyone being so weird?" I asked Ross as the two of us walked down the hallway.

I had noticed as soon as we walked in the school that students were being uncharacteristically excited and jumpy. Ross and I weren't the only ones left out of the buzz as other students looked just as confused as we did.

"I have no idea," Ross responded as we passed a group of cheerleaders who were all looking at a picture on one girl's phone.

Bella and Pete were already at my locker when Ross and I arrived. When Bella saw us, she smiled widely and motioned for us to come closer.

"Did you see what the football team did?" she asked excitedly.

I groaned and threw my head back. "What did they do?"

Bella practically shoved her phone in my face, forcing me to look at a picture. I took the phone from her hand and held it the appropriate distance from my face so I could get a good look.

The picture was taken of the Knight statue in front of Sam's school. The Knight usually stood proud for the school with its armor and confident stance. The statue in the picture was covered head to toe in red Warriors gear. The football team had somehow gotten our school apparel on the statue. It wore a Warrior's football shirt, along with a zip-up sweatshirt, and our red and black school sweatpants. The statue was topped off with a Warrior's winter hat and a sign that said, "Go Warriors," was stuck onto the plaque at the base of the statue.

I handed Bella back her phone, shaking my head. "At least they didn't damage anything."

"So they started the prank war," Ross said. "Great."

"Come on, dude," Pete started. "Admit it, it's a little funny."

Bella nodded in agreement. "And it's completely harmless. No harm in a little fun, right?"

Ross and I gave each other knowing looks before turning back to Bella. I was just glad Nathan and the team hadn't done anything completely stupid and risk a just as stupid retaliation. The pranks had gotten out of hand before and I hoped that both teams had learned from that and would keep the pranks harmless this time around.

"Well, I guess we can expect something from the Knights by the end of the week," Ross said, leaning against the locker next to mine. I nodded with a slight laugh.

"You guys aren't even a little bit excited?" Bella asked in a disappointed tone. "This is basically what this school lives for! Get hyped!"

I shook my head at her to which she scoffed and turned her attention back to Pete, talking animatedly about how excited she was for the rivalry Thanksgiving game.

***

"She's a killer queen–" Sam's phone sang as he played his Spotify playlist that he had made a while back.

The two of us were cleaning up the bakery, getting ready to close. We had decided that we would switch off every day with each other's playlist while we closed up. Tonight, Sam played his music which consisted of a lot of Queen to which he sang terribly off-key to.

"I never noticed that I know so many Queen songs," I commented as "Killer Queen" ended and "Under Pressure" began.

"Of course you do, they're iconic," Sam replied, not looking up from the floor where he was sweeping.

"Have you seen the new Freddie Mercury movie?" I asked, putting a chair up on a table.

Sam shook his head. "No, not yet."

"Maybe we could go this weekend," I suggested, causing Sam to look up at me.

"Are you asking me out on a date?" he asked with a smirk.

I just playfully rolled my eyes. "Sure."

Sam looked as if he was pondering on my suggestion for a moment before he spoke up again.

"What if we see people we know?" he asked thoughtfully.

"We'll just have to go a bit out of town," I said with a shrug.

"Will you take me to dinner too?" Sam asked, a playful smile on his face.

"Oh my God, just say yes," I complained, moving onto the next table and smacking my rag down to wipe it.

"Fine, pushy," Sam said before returning to sweeping the floor.

We worked in a comfortable silence for a few moments, a song I didn't know playing from Sam's phone. Sam walked up behind me when he finished sweeping, causing me to jump slightly.

"Way to give me a heart attack," I said, clutching my chest with my hand.

"Stop being dramatic," he said with an eye roll. "Come over tomorrow after school."

"You're bad at *asking* me out," I pointed out, leaning back against the table.

Sam stood directly in front of me, towering over me as I sat on the table top. He smirked down at me and looked as if he was going to say something

before I grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down to catch his lips with mine. Sam smiled into the kiss and eagerly responded before pulling away, a smirk prevalent on his face.

"I guess I don't need to *ask* since you can't resist me," he teased, placing his hand on my cheek and twirling his finger in my hair.

"It's your fault that you're hot," I muttered, hopping down from the table.

"Actually it's not," Sam laughed. "You can blame my parents for that."

"I don't even know your parents," I argued, walking over to the counter to wipe it down. "So I guess that means I have to blame you."

"That sounds a little unfair," Sam replied, walking by me to put the broom back in the kitchen.

I shrugged and smirked at him when he walked back out of the kitchen, coming to stand beside me as I finished wiping down the counter.

"Do you need a ride home?" Sam asked, nudging my arm.

I looked out the window at the front of the store just as Nathan pulled into the parking lot. I put a few feet of distance between Sam and me, noticing just how close we were standing, when Nathan parked the car right up front.

"I don't think Nathan will ever forget about me here again," I said with a sigh, tossing the rag into the kitchen before making my way to the door with Sam following closely behind me.

"That's a good thing I guess," Sam replied blandly as I opened the bakery door. I held the door for him and locked it after he walked through.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow," I said, looking toward Nathan's scrutinizing stare.

Sam looked toward him with an unreadable expression before nodding and making his way toward his car at the other end of the parking lot. I watched

as he walked away for a few moments before sliding into the passenger seat of mine and Nathan's shared car.

"You would tell me if he ever did anything to you, right?" Nathan asked as I buckled my seat belt, looking off toward Sam as he got in his car.

No, I wouldn't.

I rolled my eyes. "He won't do anything to me."

"I just don't trust him with the rivalry game coming up," Nathan said as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"You don't need to, I trust him," I admitted, looking at Nathan pointedly.

Nathan raised his eyebrows and looked at me briefly before turning his attention back to the road.

"We work together almost every day," I explained. "And he is nothing but nice to me so you need to just get over it."

I looked out the window and rested my head on it. The cold glass on my skin shocked me, but I didn't pull away.

"Whatever," Nathan mumbled. "Did you bring home any sweets?"

I turned to face him and gave him a look of disbelief. "No."

Nathan groaned. "I'm *craving* a chocolate chip muffin."

"Stop at Dunkin," I suggested.

"No, because I have to pay for it there," Nathan explained, continuing to drive toward our house.

I shook my head but didn't respond. Soon enough, we were home and greeted by our parents as we walked in the door.

"How was work?" Mom asked as she leaned into Dad's side on the couch, the two of them watching a movie.

"Fine," I said as Nathan walked by me to go into the kitchen.

"Glad to see Nathan picked you up," Dad commented, not taking his eyes off the screen.

I didn't respond, not wanting to get into it with my father while he seemed to be in a sour mood. Instead of saying anything to my parents, I walked by them and headed to my bedroom.

***

"Hey, do you want to go for a run?" Ross asked as he caught up to me in the hallway.

"Can't, I have to help Charlene with something at the bakery," I lied, continuing to walk toward the exit.

"What about tomorrow?" he asked.

"Have to work," I told him with an apologetic look.

Ross sighed and looked as if he wanted to say something, but stayed quiet. I motioned for him to go on and he let out another sigh.

"Do you not want to run with me anymore?" he asked. "Because I cancelled on you last time?"

No matter how many times I told Ross that what happened that night wasn't his fault, he would never stop feeling guilty for it. Never once had I blamed him for it, yet he constantly beat himself up about it.

"No," I answered instantly. "We can go some time this weekend."

Ross nodded, pressing his lips together tightly.

The two of us parted ways when Ross got to his car. I walked toward the back of the parking lot, away from everyone, and continued walking toward the street toward Sam's house, knowing he would pick me up on the way. I was only walking for a few minutes when he pulled up beside me and blared the horn with an annoyed look on his face. I smirked and slid into the passenger seat.

"I told you to wait for me at the school," Sam said sternly, pulling away from the curb.

"And I told you that was a stupid plan," I countered, looking toward him with my eyebrows raised.

"How is that a stupid plan?" he asked forcefully, sounding more annoyed.

"You think people wouldn't notice Sam Knight driving onto our campus?" I asked.

"Who cares?" Sam asked, nearly yelling. "It's better than you getting fucking jumped on the sidewalk." Sam shook his head, his jaw clenched tight.

I rolled my eyes and looked out the window. "First of all, that won't happen during the day and second, it was *your* team that did that."

Sam glared at me out of the corner of his eyes before his gaze softened.

"You're right," he said with a sigh.

"I know," I replied snidely.

Sam reached out and rested his right hand on my knee, rubbing his thumb over my jeans. I turned my head to hide my smile as I looked out the window at the passing trees.

Soon enough, we arrived at Sam's house. He led me inside and motioned for me to sit beside him on the couch. As soon as I sat down, Sam pushed me down so I was lying on the couch with him hovering over me. He smirked down at me while his necklace dangled in front of my face. I grabbed it and

tugged, pulling his head down to meet mine. Sam wasted no time plunging into the kiss at a rough pace.

Sam brought his hand to cup my face as his lips continued to assault mine. Our tongues met as we both deepened the kiss. Sam pulled away slightly, his teeth tugging on my bottom lip. He looked at me briefly before bringing his lips back down onto mine. Our kiss grew more heated and sloppier by the minutes. Sam grazed his teeth on my bottom lip before biting down harder, causing me to pull away.

"Sam," I moaned. "Don't be so fucking rough."

Sam chuckled and kissed my cheek. "You like it."

I smirked up at him in agreement and put my hand on the back of his head, pulling him back down to me.

"You guys might want to cut that out," Jonah said, appearing suddenly and startling the both of us.

Sam jerked away from me, but still hovered over me with his necklace dangling in front of my face as he looked over at his brother.

"Your friends just pulled up," Jonah warned him with his eyebrows raised.

That caused Sam to stand up, pulling me by the arm into a sitting position. He threw his fingers through his hair, fixing what my fingers had done to it. A few moments later there was a knock on the door and Sam sighed, looking down at me, before going to answer the door.

I rested my head on the back of the couch and looked up at the ceiling, letting out a sigh. Jonah didn't say another word as he left the room, heading upstairs. Loud voices filled the house as Sam opened the door for his friends. They all seemed to be talking over each other and I couldn't decipher exactly what it was they were saying.

Sam, Christo, Jake, and Owen walked into the living room talking animatedly. As soon as Jake's eyes landed on me, his gaze hardened and he

motioned for everyone to stop talking.

"Did you hear any of that?" Jake asked sternly, taking a step toward me.

I rolled my eyes. "No."

He still stared at me as if he didn't believe I was telling him the truth. His eyes narrowed as he tried to decide if I was lying or not.

"Lay off, Jake," Sam said, shoving his shoulder and walking toward the couch to sit beside me.

"What's he even doing here?" Owen asked as if I wasn't in the room.

"I'm right here," I said in annoyance as Christo came to sit on my other side.

"What's up?" Christo asked happily, punching me lightly on the shoulder.

Sam shrugged. "We were just hanging out."

He picked up the remote and turned on the TV, flipping through the channels. Jake and Owen each took a seat on the two-seat couch, staring over at me as they sat down. I stared back at them with a matching glare. I wasn't going to let them try and scare me out of here. They were the ones intruding on my time with my boyfriend, even if they didn't know it.

Sam settled on a sports channel to appease his friends and Jake and Owen turned their stares to the TV. I knew I must have looked like I wanted to die of boredom. My jaw was set tightly in annoyance and I tried to look anywhere but the TV. I was beginning to think that every moment I would get with Sam was going to be ruined.

After about half an hour, the front door open and footsteps pattered down the hall to the living room quickly. Lila came barreling into the living room and her face brightened when she saw me as she flung herself onto my lap.

"Hi, Mason!" she exclaimed, throwing her tiny arms around my neck in a hug.

"Hi, Lila," I chuckled, returning the hug.

Mae walked in and gave Lila a stern look. "Lila, give Mason personal space."

She immediately listened to her mother by throwing herself onto Sam, who let out a groan at the impact.

"Hi, Uncle Sammy," she said with a toothy grin.

"Hi, Lila," he replied, patting her on the head.

"I can't believe you didn't even say hi to me," Christo said to her, feigning offense.

While Lila went over to greet Christo, I stole a glance at Jake who was now eyeing me suspiciously. He looked between Sam and me with his eyes narrowed before looking back at the TV. Eventually, Mae took Lila out of the living room and Jake was quick to speak his mind.

"Just how often is he here?" Jake asked Sam angrily, pointing a finger at me.

Sam raised his eyebrows. "I don't see how or why that matters."

"You know why," Jake nearly growled.

"Jake, chill," Christo said, trying to defuse the situation. "It doesn't matter."

"Shut up, Christo," Jake spat. Sam looked as if he was going to say something, but I cut him off.

"Jake, listen," I started. "I don't know what your problem is with me, but it got old really fast so if you have something to say then just say it."

The four boys all looked stunned at my words, but Jake was quick to recover from his shock and sent me an angry glare.

"I don't trust you," Jake admitted in an icy, almost frightening tone. "You and Sam getting close is the last thing our team needs."

"Our friendship has *nothing*– "

"It does though," Jake cut me off in a significantly more casual tone. "Your friendship has everything to do with the team."

"Jake, shut up," Sam warned.

Jake nodded and pinched his lips tightly together.

"I trust you not to be stupid Sam," Jake said with his eyebrows raised.

"Great thanks, stop talking now," Sam responded with a glare, turning up the volume on the TV.

My glare didn't soften as I watch Jake turn his stare to the TV. I thought that the only thing I would have to worry about regarding my relationship to Sam would be telling Nathan about it when the season was over. But it seemed as though Jake's hatred for me was rooted as deep as Nathan's for Sam.

And I didn't know how we would get past that.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think about the chapter? What about Mason calling out Jake?

Please let me know :)

27

Mason Maloney

I woke up to Sam shaking me lightly. I cracked my eyes open slightly to see his handsome face looking down at mine, droplets of water hitting my cheeks from his wet hair. I smiled up at him, wiping the water from my face.

"Sorry," he said, pulling away and taking the towel from his waist to run through his hair.

"I could get used to waking up to this," I joked, my eyes looking up and down his body.

Sam smirked before throwing his towel at my face as he went to look for clothes to wear.

"I bet you could," he said teasingly as I sat up and threw the towel at his hamper.

I stood up and walked over to Sam, who was now wearing a pair of boxers. I wrapped my arms around him from behind as he stood at his dresser, resting my head on his back.

"Can I borrow some clothes?" I mumbled in a tired voice. I felt Sam's body vibrate as he let out a chuckle.

"Yes, you can borrow some clothes," he said. "I doubt I have any jeans small enough for you though."

"I'll just wear mine from yesterday," I replied, releasing him and going to pick up my jeans from the floor.

"I have a shirt for you," Sam said as he walked up behind me. I grabbed the shirt as Sam leaned in to peck me on the lips.

The two of us finished getting ready and made our way downstairs to the kitchen where Mae had breakfast made. Lila and Miles sat at the kitchen table, munching on food. When Lila saw Sam and I, a wide smile broke out onto her face.

"Good morning!" Lila exclaimed.

Sam smiled and walked over to her, giving her a kiss on the head before heading to the cabinet to get plates.

"Morning, Lila," I said, taking a seat beside her.

"You and Uncle Sammy had a sleepover?" she asked curiously, tilting her head slightly.

I let out a chuckle and nodded. "We did."

Lila frowned. "I want to have a sleepover with you guys."

"Lila," Mae warned with a pointed look.

"Maybe some other time," Sam said as he walked over to the table and placed a plate with toast and eggs in front of me. He sat down on my other side with his plate and gave me a kiss on the cheek before digging into his food.

Miles looked up from his plate to give Sam a strange, questioning look.

"Did you just kiss him?" Miles asked confusedly.

My face flushed in embarrassment and Sam's eyes widened as if he hadn't realized he did that in front of his niece and nephew.

"Boys kiss?" Lila asked, looking just as confused.

"Sometimes," Sam muttered, looking down at his plate before clearing his throat. "Mason is my boyfriend."

We looked to Lila and Miles for a few moments in silence, both of them looking confused. Eventually, Miles just shrugged and went back to eating his breakfast. Lila looked between Sam and me with a look of concentration on her face.

"I thought only girls could have boyfriends," Lila said, tilting her head to the side.

Mae came up behind her, shaking her head. "Boys can have boyfriends."

"Can girls have girlfriends?" Lila asked.

Mae nodded with a small smile on her face.

"That's so cool!" Lila exclaimed excitedly.

Sam and I laughed, both looking at each other in relief as Jonah walked into the kitchen.

"Daddy, did you know that Mason is Uncle Sammy's boyfriend?" Lila asked her father excitedly.

He chuckled slightly, looking over at the two of us. "I didn't know. Wow, that's so cool, huh?"

Lila nodded happily, popping a piece of toast in her mouth. Jonah smiled down at his daughter before joining his wife in the kitchen and placing a kiss on her cheek as he poured himself a cup of coffee. Jonah joined us at the table, looking at the two of us with a smirk.

"Is this going to be a frequent thing?" Jonah asked lightly, gesturing toward the two of us.

Sam just shrugged and took a sip of his coffee.

"Are you ever going to tell your friends?" Jonah asked, causing Sam to quickly slam his coffee mug down and shake his head.

"Do *not* say anything," Sam demanded seriously.

Jonah just held his hands up in defense before looking over to me briefly. I didn't feel uncomfortable from his stare like I had before. I had a feeling that Sam's relationship with Jonah was complicated, but Jonah wasn't a bad guy. He seemed to support our relationship and accept Sam for who he was. And that was enough for me.

I quickly finished my breakfast and stood up to bring my plate to the sink, Sam following behind me.

"We have to get going," he told me, brushing his hand on my lower back.

I nodded. "Okay."

After Sam and I placed our dishes in the sink, we bid his family a goodbye before heading out to his car. He instantly turned the heat on and we waited for the car to warm up before Sam pulled out of his driveway.

"You can't drop me off at the school," I reminded him, raising my eyebrows.

Sam rolled his eyes. "I know that."

"Just making sure," I mumbled.

My phone started vibrating in my pocket. I pulled it out and looked down at the screen to see that Nathan was calling me. Part of me thought it would be better to answer it because I knew he would keep calling until I did, but the other part of me knew it was risky to talk to him while I was in the car with Sam.

"Your brother?" Sam asked, looking at me briefly.

I nodded and hummed, silencing my phone and putting it back in my pocket.

"He's probably mad at me for not coming home last night," I explained, looking over toward Sam.

"Where does he think you are?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I didn't tell him I was going anywhere."

Sam rolled his eyes and shook his head, not saying anything.

"What?" I asked, a little bit annoyed.

"Nothing," Sam lied.

"Seriously, what?"

"I'm just thinking maybe you shouldn't purposely try to piss your brother off," Sam replied, causing me to send him a dirty look.

"I'm not," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Sure," Sam said sarcastically. "I'm just saying, you know he doesn't want you disappearing without telling him."

"So what?" I asked incredulously. "He doesn't need to know where I am all the time."

"He's just worried," Sam said. "I understand why he is worried about you."

I gave him a pointed look. "Don't try to make me feel guilty."

"I'm not," Sam responded seriously. "Just giving you my opinion."

"Well, don't," I replied, looking out the window and ending our conversation.

We spent the rest of the car ride in silence before Sam pulled down a side road near my school. I opened the door, moving to get out of the car before Sam grabbed me by the arm and pulled me closer to him. Before I could say anything, he placed his lips on mine briefly. He let go of my arm and allowed me to pull away from him.

"See you later," Sam said.

I sighed. "Later."

I quickly got out of the car and closed the door before walking down the sidewalk, letting out a deep, cloudy breath. I stuck my hands in my pocket as I entered the parking lot of the school. As I walked toward the building, a car blared its horn at me. I turned to give the person a dirty look to see that it was Nathan.

"I'm going to kill you," Nathan said after rolling down the window as he drove by me.

I shook my head in annoyance as I watched him drive away. After he parked the car, he waited for me to catch up to him and instantly stopped me, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"Did we not *just* have a conversation about you disappearing?" Nathan asked seriously.

I rolled my eyes. "You didn't even call me until this morning."

"So you ignored my call?" he asked.

I shoved him away from me and let out a scoff.

"Stop being so fucking dramatic," I said, turning to walk toward the school. Nathan followed closely behind me.

It occurred to me that I was also being dramatic, not only with Nathan, but with Sam as well. Sometimes I just let stupid things get to me. Sam was only voicing his opinion, yet I allowed myself to get annoyed with him and that annoyance was carrying over into my conversation with Nathan.

"Where were you?" Nathan asked hastily, leaning closely to my ear.

"I was just out," I answered vaguely, walking through the crowded hallway as people dispersed to allow Nathan through.

"With your boy?" Nathan asked in an accusatory tone. "Is he a bad influence on you or something? Because you're being all secretive and rebellious."

I shot Nathan and dirty look and rolled my eyes as we stopped at my locker. None of my friends had arrived yet like I had hoped, so I was still stuck alone with my brother.

"Just leave it alone," I pleaded in an almost whining tone, opening my locker.

"I just wish I could know who he is," Nathan said, leaning against the locker next to mine.

"Well, you can't," I mumbled.

"I'd like to be able to see if he's good enough for you," Nathan continued, crossing his arms.

While I appreciated Nathan's concern, I couldn't help but feel some dread. I knew eventually he would find out about Sam and he wouldn't be happy about it. I wouldn't be surprised if he would conspire some way to break us up. I didn't want to resent him for that, but I didn't want him to hate me either.

"If he wasn't, I wouldn't be with him," I said quietly, looking around to make sure no one was listening to our conversation.

Nathan got the hint and looked around as well, stepping closer to me.

"So it's, like, official?" Nathan asked, lowering his voice.

I nodded, not bothering to say anything else about it. The last thing I wanted to do was discuss my relationship with him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bella approaching. I let out a sigh of relief as she made her way over to my locker.

"Good morning boys!" Bella exclaimed, throwing an arm around Nathan and her other around me. "What are we talking about?"

"Nothing," I answered quickly with a casual smile.

"Just brother stuff," Nathan said, his smile matching mine.

"Sounds boring," Bella said with her eyebrows raised.

Nathan and I shared a look. "It is," we said at the same time.

We weren't the stereotypical twins that said and did things at the same time, but when it did happen on occasion, it annoyed us to no end. We each sent each other matching glares while Bella let out an excited giggle.

Nathan let out a sigh and stepped out of Bella's embrace. "I'm leaving," he said, walking away before waiting for a response.

"He seems moodier than usual," Bella commented, looking up at me. "And now that I think of it, so do you."

I shook my head as I watched him leave. "He's just being annoying, like always."

Bella hummed and nodded in agreement before starting a story about her dream last night to which I only half listened to.

***

"Oh my God," Bella said with her mouth wide open in shock as we walked toward the school together the next morning.

My eyes followed her's, looking up at our school's flag pole. Our usual Warriors flag was replaced with a Knights flag, hanging high and proud in front of the school. Quite a few football players stood at the base of the flag pole, my brother included. The rope holding the flag up was cut and tied at the top, making it so no one could pull the flag down. Rick placed his hand on the pole as if he was going to try to climb it, but instantly took it off and looked at it with disgust written on his face.

"What's going on?" I asked as Bella and I approached Nathan. "Why aren't you taking it down?"

Nathan shot me a murderous glare, obviously angry at the prank the Knights pulled. I couldn't understand why he would expect anything less than this since he had started it.

"They put grease on the pole," Nathan spat. "We can't climb it."

It took everything in me to hold back my laughter. I knew Nathan wouldn't appreciate it if I expressed amusement in the Knights' prank.

"The school will get it down," I assured him, looking up at the flag that was blowing in the wind.

Nathan didn't say anything before he stormed off, most likely headed to the office to get someone to get the flag down. It was then that I let my laughter out, looking over to Bella who was signalling for me to cut it out.

"Come on," I said with a chuckle. "It's a little funny."

"It would have been funny if *we* did it to *them* ," she answered, pulling me to follow her into the school.

I shook my head and let out another chuckle. It was a little funny, no matter who did it. The people at this school took this rivalry too seriously.

***

Later in the day, Nathan had noticeably calmed down from this morning as he drove me to work. One of the custodians had eventually taken the flag down and rehung the Warriors flag, which the Knights had left on the ground, next to the flag pole.

"Bring home some sweets tonight," Nathan demanded as he pulled into the bakery's parking lot.

"What do you want?" I asked, unbuckling my seat belt as he stopped the car.

"Anything," he said. "I will eat just about anything."

I sighed. "Okay, I'll see you tonight."

I walked into the bakery to see Charlene and Sandy up front. Charlene seemed as if she was getting ready to go as she had her purse thrown over her shoulder and her phone in hand.

"Good afternoon, Mase," Charlene greeted me with a smile.

"Hi, Charlene," I said, giving her a brief hug. A moment later, the bakery door opened and Sam walked in, much to my surprise. He usually wouldn't show up for another hour at least.

"Samuel! Nice to see you," Charlene greeted, moving from me to Sam.

I watched the two of them interact, taking note of Sam's wide smile, as I tried to see if there was anything wrong with him. From experience with Nathan, I knew that he was never allowed out of practice unless he was injured or sick, so I knew there had to be a reason like that for Sam to be here so early. The only time he was here this early was on Wednesdays when he had a morning practice.

After Charlene left the bakery, I pulled Sam into the kitchen by the arm after making sure Sandy wasn't watching us. He followed me willingly, looking confused when I turned to face him for a moment. I leaned against the counter in the kitchen while Sam gave me a questioning look.

"Are you looking to make out while Sandy is right out there?" he asked jokingly, pointing toward the front of the store.

I rolled my eyes. "No."

Sam let out a sound of disappointment with a cute pout on his face, but didn't say anything.

"Why are you here?" I asked him seriously, my eyebrows raised in question.

Sam looked at me as if I was crazy. "I work here...?"

I gave him a frustrated smack on the shoulder. "You know what I mean. Why aren't you at practice?"

Sam's eyes drifted away from me and up to the ceiling before he looked back down at my face. He let out a deep sigh before answering me.

"Coach wants me to rest my shoulder," he said vaguely.

"Why?" I pressed further.

I knew his coach wouldn't want him to rest his arm unless there was something wrong with it. The only way he would miss practice was if they were trying to preserve him for his upcoming game.

"We practiced without pads last period and I hurt my shoulder," he explained. "I'm fine though."

I gave him a worried look to which he grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me slightly.

"It's nothing serious," Sam assured me. "We iced it to get the swelling down and I'll probably have to throw some KT tape on there, but it's fine."

"How did you hurt it?" I asked.

Sam let go of my shoulders and his face tinged pink out of embarrassment.

"I was messing around with Christo and he shoved me and I fell on my shoulder," Sam admitted shyly.

"I bet your coach loved that," I sarcastically replied.

Sam let out a laugh. "Oh, yeah. I thought he was going to kill us."

I nodded. "So you'll be okay to play tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'll definitely play tomorrow," he answered confidently.

I looked behind Sam to make sure the coast was clear before I tilted my head up and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth. He smiled into the kiss and moved to deepen it as I pulled away. Sam let out a whine of annoyance.

"Sandy's here, remember?" I reminded him with a smirk.

Sam threw his head back and let out a groan. "When is she leaving?"

I laughed, walking by him to go back out to the front of the store. Sam dragged his feet, following closely behind me.

"To be continued," Sam whispered in my ear, brushing his hand on my lower back before walking past me to stand at the register with Sandy.

I smiled at his words and leaned against the pastry case, hoping Sandy would be leaving soon.

**

Hi all! Thanks for the reads, comments, and votes! I really appreciate it!

What did you think of the chapter??

What's been a part of this book that has made you happy? A part that made you mad? Who's your favorite character?

Let me know!

28

Mason Maloney

"Ugh, I don't even want to think about this!" Bella exclaimed, falling back on my bed with her laptop on her legs.

"Well, you have to," Ross said from across the room, where he was spinning around on my desk chair.

I didn't say anything because I couldn't help but agree with Bella. The three of us were sitting in my room, researching colleges to apply to as we waited for Pete to arrive. Bella was very obviously stressed out about the process, and so was I.

"I don't even know what I want to do with my life," I muttered as I looked through the website of a local community college.

Bella groaned aloud at that while Ross nodded in agreement.

"Do you know where Nathan is going?" Ross asked me curiously.

I shrugged. "Any D1 school that will give him a scholarship and a starting position."

"Why don't you just go wherever he goes?" Ross wondered.

I had thought about that before, but decided it probably wouldn't be the best for me to follow wherever Nathan went. The two of us obviously wanted to do different things with our lives, so I didn't think going where he went would do me any good.

"I have an idea," Bella said suddenly, sitting up on the bed abruptly beside me. "We should all go to the same school."

I rolled my eyes. Any time the topic of college was brought up, Bella suggested that the four of us go to the same place. We were all on board until this proved to be problematic since Bella wanted to leave the state for school while Ross and Pete didn't and I was still unsure. I wouldn't mind going somewhere warmer, but I wasn't sure how I would handle being far away from home.

Now that I was with Sam, I also had him to think about. It was uncertain whether the two of us would last that long, but if we did, we faced the problem of having to do long distance. I didn't even know where he wanted to go.

"I can't afford to be going to school out of state," Ross said to her, his face holding a bored expression.

"Some out of state colleges are cheaper than the in-state tuition in Massachusetts," Bella pointed out, pointing a finger at Ross with a triumphant expression on her face as she poked a hole in his argument.

"But then we have to fly home for holidays and stuff," he argued further.

"We can drive!" Bella exclaimed. "We all pitch in for gas and take turns driving, it's not rocket science."

Ross groaned. "I don't know, Bell."

Before anything else was said, Pete barged into my room and plopped down on my bed beside Bella. He looked over at her laptop before grimacing and shutting it softly.

"I do *not* want to think about college right now," Pete said, shaking his head at us.

"None of us do, that's the problem," I said, shutting my own laptop and getting up from my bed to set it down on my desk.

"Maybe we should go to New York," Bella said, ignoring what Pete had said.

I gave her a strange look. "It's just as cold there as it is there. I thought the point was to go somewhere warm."

Bella rolled her eyes. "The point is to live somewhere else for a change."

Pete shook his head. "I'm not living in New York."

"Why not?" Bella asked almost angrily, turning to face Pete.

" *Everyone* goes to New York," Pete said. "Or LA, so I'm not going there either."

I couldn't argue with him about that.

Bella gave him a dirty look, but didn't push him any further as she opened her laptop back up and started typing away.

"Anyway," Pete started, leaning back against my headboard. "What are we doing after the game tonight? We can go to my place, but my parents will be there."

"Aren't your parents going away this weekend, Mase?" Bella asked, not looking up from her laptop.

I tried my best to hold back a groan. My parents were going away this weekend, and Nathan wouldn't be here either. Since I was planning on having the house to myself, Sam was going to be over tonight.

"Yeah, I do remember them saying that," Ross said in agreement with Bella.

"Awesome, I'd rather be here anyway," Pete replied.

I guess I didn't have a say in this.

"Um..." I trailed, causing three pairs of eyes to zero in on me.

"What?" Bella asked with a confused expression.

"I kind of have plans tonight," I admitted slowly and timidly.

"With who?" Pete asked. "We're your only friends."

I rolled my eyes at that, even though it was kind of true. My three friends looked at me expectantly, waiting anxiously for my response.

"Well..." I started, trying to form a lie. "Since Nathan is going to be out tonight, Sam is going to come over so I can help him with his baking."

I was met with silence and three incredulous stares. I tried to keep my eyes off of them, looking up toward the ceiling.

"You're hanging out with Sam Knight?" Bella suddenly screeched.

I shushed her, placing my hand over her mouth. "Quiet down!"

Bella pulled my hand away from her. "You're hanging out with him after what he did to me?" she whispered.

I looked to Pete for help, but he was staring at Bella as if she was crazy.

"He didn't *do* anything to you, Bell," I said quietly.

Bella scoffed and stood up abruptly, gathering her things. "I know you have to work with him, but hanging out with him? That's not cool, Mase! Did you even think about how I would feel?"

She left the room before I even had the chance to say anything. Pete, Ross, and I stared at the door where she left, shocked expressions on our faces.

"She's so fucking dramatic," Pete said, shaking his head in annoyance.

"Okay, so I'm not the only one that thought that was absolutely nuts?" Ross asked, looking at each of us.

"Nope, she's definitely being crazy," I confirmed with a sigh.

"She doesn't even like him anymore," Pete added.

"She just has to make everything about her," I told him to which he nodded in agreement.

"Whatever," Pete said. "I'm still coming over here after the game and I'm going to eat whatever you make."

The both of us looked to Ross to hear his answer.

"Count me in," Ross said, to which Pete let out an excited cheer.

Part of me was happy that my friends were going to hang out with Sam and me so they could see what he was really like. The other part of me was disappointed that the two of us wouldn't be getting any alone time.

Bella's reaction bothered me to no end. I wish I could say that I couldn't believe how selfish she was being, but I could. It was just what she was like. I didn't even want to think about what she was going to do when she found out that Sam and I were dating.

I wasn't sure I would make it out of that alive.

***

"You're literally so embarrassing," I said to Pete, shaking my head at him as he sat in the basket of the shopping cart that Ross was pushing.

The football game had just ended, so I made Ross drive me to the store so I could pick up some things to bake with. I had sent Sam a text earlier to explain the situation and he had just messaged me back.

Are your friends going to hate me?

I snorted lightly before responding.

No more than yours hate me

That's fair

"Mase, hurry up and pick out your shit," Pete yelled, causing me to look up at him from my phone.

I shook my head at him out of annoyance and started down the aisle, picking up the ingredients I needed and tossing them in the carriage, hitting Pete in the process.

"What are you guys making?" Ross asked, looking down at his phone.

"Cake," I said blandly, throwing a bottle of vanilla extract into the cart and hitting Pete in the back.

Pete rubbed where the bottle hit him. "I can't wait to eat that shit."

We only spent a few more minutes in the store. I was in a hurry to get back considering Sam would be on his way soon. Once I payed for all of the ingredients, the three of us hopped into Ross's car and made our way back to my house.

"So, are you, like, actually friends with Sam?" Pete asked as he pulled a pudding cup out of my fridge while I placed my groceries on the kitchen counter.

"Kind of," I replied vaguely. It wasn't technically a lie.

While Pete leaned against the fridge eating pudding, Ross sat at the kitchen table, texting on his phone.

"Are you texting Liza?" I asked teasingly, a smirk covering my face.

Ross shot his head up and gave me a dirty look, locking his phone. Pete's eyes turned wide and his mouth hung open in shock.

"You have a thing with *Liza* ?" Pete asked incredulously.

"I hate you," Ross said, looking at me with a deadpanned look, before answering my question, "And no, I'm not."

"He's lying," I said, nudging Pete with my elbow.

Ross rolled his eyes and shook his head in annoyance, looking back down at his phone. Pete still had a shocked expression on his face as he stared at our friend. Before anyone could say anything else, there was a knock on the front door, signaling Sam had arrived. I scurried to the door and greeted him.

"Hey," Sam said with a wide smile to which I returned.

"Hey," I replied, pulling him by the arm into my house. "How was your game?" I asked as we walked to the kitchen.

"It was good," he answered quietly, looking around as if he was looking for Ross and Pete. "We won."

Pete stared at Sam and I when we walked into the kitchen while Ross paid us no mind, still preoccupied with his phone. Sam greeted Pete with a silent nod to which he returned, shoving his last spoonful of pudding in his mouth. We stood in awkward silence for a few moments before I cleared my throat.

"We're going to get started," I said to Ross and Pete, hoping they would leave the room.

Pete placed his pudding cup on the counter before walking over to Ross and smacking him on the shoulder, signaling for him to get up.

"We're gonna watch TV," Pete said before leaving the kitchen, Ross following behind him as he texted on his phone.

"So," Sam said after a moment of silence. "Those are your friends."

I nodded. "Yep."

"And Bella's not here?" he asked.

I scoffed. "No, she freaked out when I said I was hanging out with you."

Sam gave me a confused look, tilting his head to the side.

"Acting like I'm fuckin' betraying her or something," I mumbled, walking over to the counter where the ingredients were located.

"You seem tense," Sam noted, leaning against the counter next to where I stood.

I sighed, leaning forward to rest my head on his shoulder. "She just drives me insane."

Sam turned his head to look back and make sure no one was looking on before wrapping his arms around me. I leaned into his touch and let out a content sigh before tilting my head up to give him a kiss on his jaw, his stubble feeling uncomfortable on my touch. I pulled away from him and took his chin in my hand, examining his facial hair.

"I need you to do me a favor," I said, examining his face.

"Hm?" he hummed.

"Get rid of this," I said, running my thumb over his chin.

Sam chuckled, his smile wide as he looked down at me.

"What? You don't find it sexy?" he asked, feigning offense.

I rolled my eyes playfully, shoving his shoulder lightly.

"I'd love it if you just shaved it," I said with a smirk, leaning back against the counter.

Sam let out an exaggerated sigh. "I *guess* I can do that for you."

I continued smirking, pressing my lips to his before pulling away and grabbing a bowl from the cabinet.

"Let's get started on this cake," I said, handing him the bowl and walking over to the oven to preheat it.

He held it out as if he didn't know what to do with it, raising his eyebrows at me.

"You're going to make the flour mixture in that," I told him, gesturing toward the flour.

"And how do I do that?" he asked, setting the bowl down on the table.

"Mix three cups of flour, one tablespoon of baking powder, and half a teaspoon of salt," I instructed, moving aside so he could grab the ingredients he needed that I had placed on the counter.

While Sam worked on the flour mixture, I started on the batter. I put the ingredients I needed in my electric mixer and set it on low before turning to Sam to see if he was done. I added eggs one at a time to my mixture and then stirred in vanilla extract before motioning for Sam to come over with his bowl.

"Put in a little bit at a time and gently hand mix it," I told him, shutting off the electric mixer and pulling the bowl off. Sam followed my instructions while I got the pans out and greased them.

"Add some buttermilk," I said, gesturing to where I left it on the counter.

After Sam was done with the batter, I poured it into two different pans and placed them in the oven. I turned to face him, putting my hands on my hips.

"Should we just wait in here until it's done?" I asked, not wanting to go sit with my friends.

Sam chuckled, shaking his head. "We should probably go see Ross and Pete before they catch us doing something they shouldn't see."

"Who said we were going to do anything they shouldn't see?" I asked sarcastically, smirking up at him as he stepped closer to me.

"I know you can't resist me," he teased with an arrogant expression.

He was right.

"It's easier than you think," I lied, placing my hand on his chest and pushing him away lightly.

Sam laughed quietly as he followed closely behind me, the two of us making our way to the living room. Pete was lying across the couch while Ross was sitting in the recliner, still having his eyes glued to his phone. Neither of them looked up when Sam and me entered the living room and sat down together on the two-seat couch.

"Where's the cake?" Pete asked, staring at the TV.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head at him while Sam chuckled softly, throwing his arm over the back of the couch behind me.

When I got a good look at Pete, I saw that he was holding a glass bottle in his hand. He absentmindedly took a swig from the bottle, wincing slightly as the liquid went down his throat.

"Did you steal that from my room?" I asked in an accusatory tone.

Pete looked from the bottle to me and nodded before turning back to the TV.

"Want some?" Pete asked, holding out the bottle for me to take. I rolled my eyes, but leaned over to grab the bottle anyway and took a long sip.

I raised my eyebrows and offered the bottle to Sam, to which he just shook his head, before handing the bottle back to Pete.

"I'm so glad Bella's not here," Pete voiced aloud. "I love her but she's too much sometimes."

"You can say that again," Ross mumbled, placing his phone under his leg.

"She really doesn't like you," Pete said with a laugh, pointing at Sam.

"I heard," Sam replied, looking over at me.

Pete laughed again, waving him off. "She's crazy, don't take it personal."

"Trust me, I don't," Sam said with a laugh of his own.

"So," Pete started, sitting up on the couch and facing Sam. "Who came up with the flag prank?"

I shot Pete a dirty look for bringing up the stupid rivalry. However, instead of being uncomfortable like I thought he would be, Sam just let out another laugh and smiled widely.

"Wish I could take credit for it," Sam said. "But it was Jake."

I scoffed. "Of course it was."

"Jake Johnson?" Ross asked, moving to sit on the couch with Pete.

"Yeah," Sam answered. "You know him?"

"I know of him," Ross replied.

"He's an ass," I told Ross.

Sam nodded in agreement. "He can be."

"You know his friends?" Pete asked me, looking confused.

"They come into the bakery all the time," I said, stretching the truth a bit. The bakery is where I first met them, but that wasn't necessarily the reason I knew Jake was an ass.

"We should start doing that," Pete said, turning to Ross. Ross smirked and nodded happily.

"No, you shouldn't," I said, shaking my head.

The last thing I needed was Sam's and my own friends hanging around the bakery all the time. Not only would that cause conflict between them, but I wouldn't get the alone time I craved with Sam when we had down time at work and were able to hide away in the kitchen.

"I'm going to go get the cakes out of the oven," I said, standing up from the couch and leaving Sam alone with my friends.

Once I got the cakes out, I set them on top of the stove to let them cool. When I got back to the living room, Sam had moved from the two-seat couch to sit with Ross and Pete on the larger couch. Pete and Sam were laughing and looking at something on Pete's phone while Ross was looking at his own.

I smiled at the two of them as I sat down in my previous seat. I was hoping they would get along so that when the time comes to tell them about our relationship, we would at least have someone on our side.

I couldn't help but let relief wash over me as I watched Sam and Pete interact. At least one of my friends didn't hate him.

**

Thanks for reading!!

What did you think about Sam hanging out with Mason's friends?

Also, I know you guys are wanting some drama and I promise it's coming, so just bear with me!

Let me know what you think!

29

Mason Maloney

My neck was sore when I woke up the next morning. I had slept practically sitting up on the two-seat couch with Sam leaning his head on my shoulder. Pete passed out on the larger couch while Ross slept on the recliner. I cracked my eyes open, squinting at the bright sunlight coming in through the blinds and let out a groan. Sam shifted beside me, moving his head from my shoulder to the arm of the couch.

When I looked over at him, that was when it hit me. Nathan was going to be coming home today and I had no idea when, but we Sam couldn't be here for it.

"Sam," I hissed, shaking him. "Wake up."

Sam groaned and mumbled incoherent words, his voice muffled by the couch. I shook him more harshly until he sat up, looking at me with a sleepy expression.

"What?" he asked in a tired, annoyed tone.

"We can't be here when Nathan gets back," I told him, choosing to ignore his rude tone.

"Well, when is he coming back?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm not risking it."

Sam nodded, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. I stood up from the couch, tugging Sam up with me before shoving Pete in the shoulder. Pete let out a loud groan and sat up with an angry look on his face.

"Let me sleep!" Pete exclaimed, waking Ross up in the process.

"We gotta go," I said, starting toward the stairs to get to my room.

I changed into dark blue jeans and a crew-neck sweatshirt and quickly went to the bathroom to brush my teeth before going back downstairs to see my three friends waiting impatiently.

"We're always waiting on either you or Bella," Pete said in an annoyed tone, his arms crossed and a frown on his face.

I ignored him, shaking my head, before heading out toward the door. The four of us left the house, starting toward Ross's car. I felt someone tug at my arm and turned around to see that it was Sam. He pulled me aside as Pete and Ross went to the car.

"I'm gonna head home," Sam said, looking down at me.

I frowned. "You don't want to come to breakfast with us?" I asked.

"You know I shouldn't," he said with a knowing look.

I sighed and nodded. He was right. It was one thing to hang out with us in the comfort of my home, but it was another to be out in public with us. I couldn't imagine any of his friends would be too happy if they found out about this, especially so close to the rivalry game. I couldn't wait for the football season to be over, then the two of us could be free.

"Okay," I said with a slight pout. "I'll see you at work later."

Sam nodded with a small, close-lipped smile. "See you."

Sam walked off to where his own car was parked, waving at Ross and Pete. I watched as he got in and started it up before I made my way to Ross's car and threw myself in the backseat.

"Step on it, Ross," Pete demanded as soon as I got in the car. "I'm not getting any younger and I'm *starving* ."

Ross mumbled incoherent words with a dirty look on his face, shaking his head, before throwing the car in reverse and peeling out of my driveway.

We were barely half way down my street when Pete's stomach growled, causing him to clutch it and throw his head back, letting out a loud groan.

" *Ross* ," Pete complained.

"Can you maybe develop a real personality?" Ross snapped. "Because being hungry all the time is not a personality trait."

"Why are you being so pissy?" I asked confusedly.

Ross groaned. "I'm sorry. I'm just fucking exhausted."

"I will forgive you if you get us to breakfast in two minutes or less," Pete said, still grabbing onto his stomach.

Ross sent him a brief dirty look before turning back to the road.

I wished Sam was here so I wouldn't have to deal with my bickering friends alone, but it would be a while before the two of us would be free to be together publicly.

That time couldn't come soon enough.

***

Sam Knight

"What kept you out all night?" Jonah asked as I walked in the front door. He sat on the couch with Mae tucked into his side, the two of them watching the morning news.

"Stayed at Mase's," I said casually.

"Yeah, we figured," Mae replied with a smirk.

"His brother wasn't there?" Jonah asked, giving me a cautious look.

I shook my head. "His friends were though."

Jonah nodded but didn't say anything, looking back toward the TV. Mae looked at me with a large smile and patted the spot next to her on the couch for me to sit. I did as she said and she immediately spoke up.

"You should invite Mason to my parent's house for Thanksgiving," Mae suggested, nudging Jonah in his side.

"Seriously?" I asked slowly, as if I thought she was kidding. But I knew Mae, and she wasn't joking.

Mae nudged Jonah in the side again and gave him a look that only wives could give.

"Oh, uh, yeah," Jonah started, appeasing his wife. "You should definitely do that."

I thought about it for a moment. It wasn't actually a terrible idea. Mae's parents lived about half an hour away, so we wouldn't be near town. Besides, we would be at their house so it wasn't like we would be seeing anyone from the Knights or the Warriors.

"Okay," I said. "I'll ask him today."

Mae squealed in excitement, clapping her hands.

"Are you sure it's okay with your parents?" I asked her timidly.

The last thing I wanted was Mae's parents being unwelcoming and making Mason uncomfortable. They weren't bad people, and I knew them pretty well, but I didn't know their stances on this. For all I knew, they could be homophobes.

"Yes, they're totally fine with it," she replied with a serious look on her face, placing her hand on my shoulder so I would catch the double meaning to her words. They were okay with Mason coming *and* with me dating him.

I nodded and sent Mae a small smile of gratitude.

"Do you want any breakfast?" Mae asked me suddenly.

"I can get myself something," I assured her.

"Are you sure? I can make something," she insisted.

I nodded. "I'm fine. Thanks though."

Eventually, I got up from the couch and made my way to the kitchen. I grabbed a bowl and some milk and cereal before sitting at the table to eat my breakfast, scrolling through my phone. I already had texts from my friends who were looking to get together during the day. While I was scrolling through my texts, I got a call from Christo.

"Hello?" I answered, my mouth full of cereal.

"We're going to the gym, you in?" he asked, his words sounding like they came out of his mouth faster than he could even think of them.

I checked the time. I still had a few hours before I had to be to work. A little bit of a work out couldn't hurt.

"Yeah, I'll meet you guys there," I answered, standing up to place my bowl in the sink.

"See you," Christo said, hanging up immediately after.

I went up to my room to grab my gym bag and clothes. Before heading back downstairs, I brushed my teeth and ran some water through my hair to tame it. I slung my gym bag over my shoulder and jogged down the stairs.

"Where are you going now?" Jonah asked, giving me a confused look with his arm slung around Mae.

"Gym," I answered blandly before exiting the house and getting into my car.

The gym was surprisingly not crowded by the time I got there. I noticed Christo's car was already there when I pulled in and I was sure Jake's was close by. Once I walked in the gym, I was greeted by Christo, who was in the middle of spotting Jake.

"Hey!" Christo exclaimed as I made my way over to them.

"Focus!" Jake yelled at him, lifting the barbell he was holding.

Christo looked back down at Jake with wide eyes and continued spotting him. I shook my head at the two and immediately headed to the locker room to get changed. Once I was done in there, I went back over to the weights to lift some dumbbells before going for some more heavy lifting.

"Where did you run off to last night?" Jake asked, sitting up on the bench, his chest rising and falling deeply.

I kept my eyes off of him, watching my arm as I lifted the weight.

"I was just home," I lied. "I was tired."

My shoulder ached slightly as I continued to lift the weights, but I paid it no mind. I couldn't afford to have an injured shoulder, not this late into the season of my senior year. I would just have to power through it.

"Whatever," Christo said. "But you have to come out with us Thanksgiving night to celebrate the win."

I rolled my eyes with a scowl on my face. "You need to stop acting like this is going to be an easy win. It never is."

"I'm not saying it's going to be easy," Christo defended himself. "But they beat us last year, we can't let them do it two years in a row. We *have* to win."

I wanted to win just as much as everyone else. Losing to the Warriors was never a good feeling and I can vividly remember just how pissed off everyone was about it last year. Nathan Maloney is the only quarterback in the state that can give me a run for my money and losing to him was one of the most frustrating, infuriating things I had ever experienced.

I felt another ache in my shoulder and placed the weights down on the rack. I would not let my shoulder be what kept me from a victory over the Warriors. Not in this lifetime.

***

Mason Maloney

I sighed, holding my phone up to my ear and listening to the rings as I waited for Sam to pick up. Nathan was nowhere to be found, as usual, so I had not way of getting to work and I knew if I decided to walk I would have Sam and Nathan pissed at me. Even though it was Nathan's fault I was stuck home anyway.

"Hey," Sam answered happily.

"Hey," I replied. "Can you come pick me up?"

"Idiot brother left you stranded?" Sam asked.

I didn't have to answer for him to know the answer to that question.

"Okay, I'll be there in ten minutes," Sam said after a moment of silence. I thanked him before hanging up the phone.

He showed up ten minutes later, like he said he would. When I walked outside to his car, I noticed Sam looked handsome as ever, his hair slicked back like he had just taken a shower and ran his hand through it. When I got into the car, I didn't hesitate to lean over and give him a chaste peck on the lips to which he smiled and leaned in for more. I pushed him lightly in the chest with a smirk.

"Let's go," I said, giving him a knowing look.

"We still have to finish what we started in the bakery the other day," Sam reminded me as he pulled the car out of my driveway and headed toward the bakery.

My smirk widened. "I'm sure we'll have time for that tonight."

Sam let out a chuckle. "Let's hope."

After a few moments of silence, Sam spoke up again.

"So, uh, Mae wanted me to invite you over for Thanksgiving," he stammered nervously.

I gave him a questioning look. "Mae wanted you to invite me?"

"I want you to come," he said quickly. "But she suggested it."

"At your house?" I asked.

Sam shook his head. "Mae's parents. They live about half an hour out of town."

I thought about it for a moment. Meeting Sam's extended family would be undeniably nerve wracking, but it would make our relationship feel all the more real.

"I'd like to go," I said shyly, looking at Sam out of the corner of my eye.

He smiled widely. "Great."

"I'll have to make up some excuse to my parents," I said, thinking aloud. There was no way they would want me to miss out on family time at Thanksgiving.

Sam nodded. "We usually do dinner kinda late because Mae's sister works during the day."

"That could work out then," I said. "Because our dinner is usually pretty early, like right after the football game."

"Perfect," Sam said with a dazzling smile, looking at me briefly as he turned into the bakery parking lot.

I couldn't help but watch him as he maneuvered to park the car. Everything about Sam was so captivating. He didn't even have to do anything and I was intrigued with him. He was just one of those people who were so hard to look away from, his aura being enchanting.

Sam sighed once the car was parked and looked over at me with a soft smile. I automatically mimicked his expression and leaned toward him.

"Ready to go spend the next eight hours working?" Sam asked jokingly.

"Yeah, as long as I get to spend it with you," I said before I could stop myself. I really was an idiot.

Sam laughed loudly, shoving me in the shoulder. "Don't go all cheesy on me now."

The bakery was quiet later in the evening when the two of us started cleaning up. I played my playlist from my phone as Sam went to the kitchen to grab the broom and I started placing the chairs up on the tables.

"Turn this one up," Sam said, as he came back out front, when "Bloom" by Troye Sivan started playing.

I chuckled but complied with his request and turned the music louder.

"Hey," I said suddenly, after a few moments of us not speaking.

"Hm?" Sam hummed, turning to face me as he continued sweeping the floor.

"Where are you planning on going for college?" I asked seriously, staring at Sam intently.

The two of us had never really spoken about college. I tried my hardest to never even think about it, but application deadlines were approaching so I had to make up my mind. Would I want to go to college with Sam? Would we even be together by then?

Sam was silent for a few moments before clearing his throat. "Um, I've been looking at UCF."

"Is that in Florida?" I asked.

Sam nodded. "It's in Orlando."

The two of us didn't say anything for a few moments. I didn't know how I felt about Sam wanting to go to Florida. It was so far away and if the two of us did end up staying together, I didn't know if we would survive the distance between us. But I also didn't know if Florida was where I wanted to go.

"What about you?" Sam asked. "Any plans?"

I sighed, leaning back against the table behind me. "I don't know. Bella wants us to all go together somewhere out of state. I want to go some place warmer, but she's willing to go just about anywhere but here."

Sam chuckled lightly. "You should go to Florida."

"Should I?"

Sam rolled his eyes at me and took a step closer. "Yes."

"You would want me to go with you?" I asked with my eyebrows raised, looking for clarification.

"I don't want you to sacrifice anything for me, but if you wanted to then, yes, I would want you to come with me," Sam explained sincerely.

I smiled up at him, pushing myself off the table to continue stacking chairs.

"So, what are you thinking?" Sam asked curiously.

"I have no idea where I want to go," I admitted, turning to face him. "But I want to look into some schools in Florida."

Sam smiled widely at me and took two large strides to give me a peck on the cheek I immediately felt my face flush, but I didn't care. Everything with Sam just felt so right. It felt as though my life wouldn't truly be my life without him in it. Now that we were making future plans together, everything felt so *real* .

And I had never felt this way before.

**

Thanks for all of the reads, comments, and votes!

Please let me know what you think of the chapter :)

Next chapter is the Thankgiving football game between the Knights and the Warriors! Any predictions about who will win?

30

Mason Maloney

The tension in the house on Thanksgiving morning was palpable. Nathan was obviously already in game-mode, blocking everyone out as he maneuvered through the kitchen to get himself some breakfast. His red football bag was laying on the floor next to the kitchen table, a clear sign that he would be leaving at any moment.

My father glanced at Nathan, taking a sip of coffee. He didn't say anything to him, he knew better. We all did. Nathan was going to be in a mood until after the game today, unless he lost. Then he would be in a mood for God knows how long.

My mother sent Nathan a concerned look. She hated when he was like this, taking himself too seriously. She thought he stressed himself out too much, and I couldn't help but agree with her.

Nathan shoved a piece of toast along with the rest of his eggs down his throat as he leaned against the counter, holding his plate only inches from his face. I sipped on my coffee, watching him closely. Once he finished his breakfast, he looked at each of us with a hard expression before walking over to where his bag was on the floor and slinging it over his shoulder.

"I'm heading to the field," Nathan said, standing in the kitchen doorway.

Mom nodded. "Okay. Good luck sweetie. You'll do great." Her voice was soothing, but her words did little to help Nathan as he gave her a tight, close-lipped smile.

"Good luck, Nathan, not that you need it," Dad said with a smirk, taking another sip of his coffee.

Nathan let out a breathy laugh. "Thanks."

I stood up and followed Nathan as he walked out of the kitchen and through the living room to get to the front door.

"Can I help you?" he asked in annoyance.

"Just wanted to tell you to not psyche yourself out," I admitted, leaning against the door after he opened it.

Nathan rolled his eyes. "I'm fine."

"Whatever," I said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Nathan replied, standing out on the porch. "Do Mom and Dad know you're going to *your man's* house for Thanksgiving?"

I had told Nathan the night before that I would need him to cover for me while I went to *my man's* house in the evening. While I would still be having Thanksgiving dinner with my family, I knew my parents would skeptical about me going somewhere else for the rest of the night. So, I told Nathan what I would be doing, without the specifics, and he agreed to go along with what ever story I came up with.

"They think I'm going to Pete's," I told him quietly, turning around to make sure our parents weren't listening in.

"Okay," Nathan responded with a sigh. "I gotta go."

I told Nathan "good luck" one last time before he descended the porch steps and made his way out to our car. I closed the door and headed back to the kitchen where my mother was beginning to prepare food for our early dinner.

We were usually the ones to host dinner, but the people who came every year varied. This year it was just going to be us, along with my mother's brother, my aunt, and my three cousins.

"Mase, are you still going to bake something?" Mom asked when I entered the kitchen.

"I was just going to do a quick pie," I told her, making my way to her side at the stove.

"Mmm," Dad hummed. "What kind of pie?"

"Apple-cranberry," I answered, turning my head to look at my father. He nodded in approval, downing the rest of his coffee.

"Are you coming to the game with us?" Dad asked, standing up to put his mug in the dishwasher.

I shook my head. "Ross is picking me up."

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us? Brandon, Celine, and the kids are coming," Mom asked, referencing my uncle, aunt, and cousins.

"I already said I would go with Ross," I said, pulling the ingredients for the pie out of the cabinet.

My mother nodded and hummed in approval as she continued preparing for Thanksgiving dinner. My father left the kitchen to clean up the house a bit before our company arrived while I finished up the pie.

Soon enough, the pie was done and in the fridge and my mother had the turkey in the oven. There was a knock on the door a few moments later and my mother sent me to let our company inside. A rush of cold air entered the house as I opened the door to see my Uncle Brandon, Aunt Celine and my three cousins standing on the porch.

"Hey, come in," I said with a smile, shivering slightly at the breeze.

Each of them gave me a hug as they entered the house. Brandon and Celine went toward the kitchen while my cousins, Hilary, Millie, and Scott stayed with me. Hilary was mine and Nathan's age while Millie was two years younger and Scott was thirteen.

"Did Nathan already leave?" Hilary asked as I lead the three of them to the living room.

I nodded. "Yeah, about an hour ago."

The four of us sat on the couch in front of the TV that was playing the Macy's Day Parade. Millie and Scott each played on their phones while Hilary and I made small talk.

"You doing any Black Friday shopping?" Hilary asked curiously.

I shook my head. "No way. You?"

"Yeah, I'm going with my friends and my boyfriend," she answered.

"Boyfriend?" I asked with a smirk. "Since when do you have a boyfriend?"

Hilary chuckled, her cheeks turning pink in slight embarrassment.

"Since about three months ago," she admitted shyly.

"Three months? You've been with him for three whole months and I haven't heard from you?" I asked, feigning offence.

Hilary rolled her eyes, shoving my shoulder lightly. "It's not like I've seen you since then."

I nodded in agreement and let out a quiet laugh. We hadn't seen each other since the summer, around the Fourth of July. Not to mention, it wasn't like *I* told her about *my* boyfriend either, though I desperately wanted to. It felt odd that the only people that knew I had a boyfriend were Sam's family and Nathan. I wanted to be able to tell everyone.

"So, what's he like?" I asked, leaning my arm on the back of the couch.

"His name's Cory," she said timidly. "He's super sweet and romantic. He's on the football team–"

"You gotta watch out for those football players," I teased with my eyebrows raised. I would know.

"He's not like the rest, trust me," Hilary said seriously.

"Doesn't he have a game today?" I asked, wondering why she would be going to Nathan's game instead of her boyfriend's.

She just shook her head. "Our town doesn't do Thanksgiving games anymore."

I found that strange, but didn't say anything. Nathan's football games had become part of our Thanksgiving tradition. I couldn't imagine a Thanksgiving without one.

A few moments later, my phone buzzed. I picked it up to read the message from Ross, telling me that he was here. I stood up, shoving my phone back in my pocket.

"I'm going to get going," I told Hilary. "My friends are taking me to the game."

She nodded. "Mind if I sit with you guys?"

"Sure. I'll save you a seat," I said before walking to the kitchen to let my parents know I was leaving.

"Okay, be careful," Mom said, walking over to me to give me a kiss on the cheek. She had been much more affectionate with me ever since I got beat up.

"Don't forget dinner is at three," Dad reminded me with a pointed look.

I nodded and bid my family a goodbye before heading out the front door to Ross's car. Pete and Bella were already in the car by the time I slipped in, Pete being in the front seat.

"Who's at your house?" Pete asked, turning around in his seat to face me as Ross pulled away from the curb.

"Uncle Brandon and Aunt Celine," I told him. My friends were fairly familiar with my family, so they knew who I was talking about.

"And your smokin' cousin Hilary?" Pete asked teasingly, a coy smile on his face with his eyebrows raised.

I punched him in the shoulder to which he let out a yelp and started rubbing the area I hit.

"It's not my fault your family is hot," Pete muttered, turning around to face forward.

Bella scoffed. "Please have some decency."

Pete ignored her, turning up the radio so that the vibrations shook the car. I saw Bella roll her eyes and look out the window. I hadn't spoken to her much since she freaked out about me hanging out with Sam, but since she was here I could assume she was over it.

The parking lot at Sam's school was already packed by the time we got there. Since the Thanksgiving game last year was at our school, it was the Knights's turn to host. Ross squeezed into a parking spot in the middle of the lot and the four of us made our way to the visitor's bleachers, passing by our excited classmates who had obviously pregamed before this.

Members of the Warriors's student body cheered and yelled on our side of the field, dressed in school apparel and some even had their faces painted with the deep red of our school colors. Plenty of girls had Nathan's jersey number, 12, painted on their faces as they chatted on the bleachers.

"We have to save a seat for Hilary," I said to my friends as we found seats toward the top of the bleachers.

Pete smirked, looking as if he was about to say something before I stopped him.

"Don't even try anything on her, she has a boyfriend," I warned him.

Pete pouted and crossed his arms while Bella thumped him on the back of the head. I shook my head and turned to Ross who was seated on my right.

"How was Nathan this morning?" Ross asked, turning toward me.

"Same as he always is before playing the Knights," I said with a sigh, standing up to wave at Hilary as her and my family made their way toward the bleachers.

She quickly saw me and headed toward us. My parents never sat on the bleachers, knowing how crowded they get with all of the students that come to the games. They always opted for bringing their own chairs and sitting in the grass with other parents.

"Hey," Hilary said, taking the seat on my left. "Thanks for saving me a seat."

"No problem," I told her with a smile.

"Hey, Hilary," Ross greeted in a casual tone. Hilary greeted him along with Pete and Bella.

Soon enough, it was time for the players to be announced. Every big game, the players would come running through their banner as the announcer said their names over the speaker. It usually only happened at the Homecoming game and during the playoffs, but they started doing it during the Thanksgiving game as well a few years ago.

The Warriors came running out first since they were the visiting team. As they were being announced there was a battle between both sides of the stands to see who could be louder. While our side cheered on our players, the Knights's side booed and the opposite happened when the Knights came out.

I tried to bite back a smile as I saw Sam run out onto the field. I couldn't see his face due to his helmet, but I knew he looked handsome. I watched silently as the captains met at the middle of the field for the coin toss. Since Nathan was the visiting captain, he got to call the toss. He would pick tails, he always picked tails.

The Warriors lost the coin toss, which was sure to annoy Nathan, and Sam chose to have the Warriors receive the ball first. Nathan lazily pointed to the

end zone on his right before turning around and walking back to the sidelines.

"He has not been having luck with the coin toss lately," Ross commented with a sigh.

I didn't say anything, even though it was true. The Warriors received the ball and started their way down the field. Nathan's throws were perfect for every pass on his opening drive, due to his relentless practicing. However, the Knights's defense wouldn't allow for a touchdown so the Warriors had to settle for a field goal and the score was 3-0.

Sam and his offense made their way onto the field. Every part of me wanted to stand and cheer for him, but I knew I wouldn't make it out of here alive if I did that. Sam's passes were perfect, much like Nathan's, and I knew my brother was going to be watching his every move. I noticed Sam rotating his shoulder after a long pass. It was clearly bothering him, but I knew he wouldn't let it take him out of the game. He was too stubborn for that.

Unfortunately for the Warriors, the Knights were able to get a touchdown and the extra point on their opening drive, making the score 7-3. I knew Nathan would be out for blood his next drives.

By the time half-time came around, the score was 21-21.

"So, this Knight kid is really good," Hilary commented to which Bella shushed her.

"Don't say that over here!" Bella said in a forceful whisper.

I shook my head at her and rolled my eyes. "Yeah, he's good. Him and Nathan have been neck-in-neck for years."

"I didn't expect anyone to be able to give Nathan a run for his money," Hilary said. "Football runs in his blood."

"Yeah, don't bring it up with him, no matter how the game ends," I warned her with a serious look.

"Sore subject?" she guessed.

I nodded. "Very."

"Uh oh, look," Hilary said, pointing down near the concession stand.

A fight had broken out between students from out school and students from the other. It only took a few moments for security to go break it up and escort the students away from the field.

I let out a sigh. "I'm sure there'll be more where that came from."

The Knights received the ball when half time was over. And, of course, Sam's throws were perfect, resulting in a touchdown on his opening drive. It had just occurred to me that I had never really paid attention to Sam when he played. I was always so focused on Nathan. Now that I was actually watching Sam in his element, I realized how natural this was for him.

Nathan was a very disciplined quarterback with a lot of talent and technique that went into his abilities. Both Sam and Nathan were natural talents when it came to football, but Sam just seemed so much more calm and at-ease, and I couldn't help but wonder if that was what made Nathan hate him so much. Maybe it was envy that it seemed like Sam didn't have to work as hard, even though that definitely wasn't the case. I was sure Sam worked just as hard as Nathan.

Nathan's next drive went well for him as well, resulting in a touchdown. What didn't go so well was the extra-point. Our kicker was never one to miss the extra-point. He pretty much had a perfect track-record when it came to that, so it was a shocker when he kicked the ball slightly to the left of the goal post. The fans on our side let out disheartened groans, followed by silence, while the Knights's fans were cheering excitedly.

I looked down to Nathan to see that he stood on the sidelines with his hands on his hips as his coach said something to him. There was no doubt in my mind that he was absolutely fuming at that moment.

The missed extra-point shouldn't have been that big of a deal. The team should have been able to come back from that.

But they didn't.

And the Warriors lost the Thanksgiving game by two points, failing to make a two point conversion.

I was torn between being excited for Sam and feeling sorry for Nathan. Neither of them looked all that happy when I glanced at each of them on the field. I wanted nothing more than to be able to go talk to Sam. Maybe I could and no one would think anything of it. Maybe–

"Mase," Ross pulled me out of my thoughts with a suspicious look on his face. "Why are you staring at Knight like that?" he whispered so only I would hear."

"I... uh... I'm not," I replied, shaking my head.

Ross didn't look all that convinced.

Soon enough we all left the field with the feeling of the loss burdening us.

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think of the chapter? Did you expect the Knights to win? How do you think Nathan is going to react? Do you think Ross suspects anything?

Let me know!

31

Mason Maloney

"Holy fuck," Pete exclaimed as the five of us walked back to Ross's car. "I don't want to be anywhere near your house when Nathan gets home."

I didn't either, but I had no choice.

"I'm sure he won't ruin Thanksgiving over this," Hilary said with optimism.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Bella commented in a warning tone.

I knew Nathan wouldn't flip out when we had family over, but that didn't mean he wouldn't sulk and be miserable all night. His attitude would create an awkwardness because no one would know what to say to him. I just prayed nobody would bring up the game to him during dinner. It would be best if football stayed out of the conversation entirely.

My family was already at the house by the time Ross dropped off Hilary and me. I didn't speak to Ross at all on the ride home, not after he looked at me like he knew I was keeping a secret.

Mom and Celine were finishing up the food in the kitchen while Dad and Brandon were setting up the table and the kids sat in the living room, watching TV.

"Need any help?" I asked my mother as I walked into the kitchen.

She turned around and gave me a smile. "We should be all set. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes, but we have to wait for Nathan."

I nodded and turned on my heel to leave the kitchen, joining my cousins in the living room. I took a seat beside Hilary on the couch while Millie was on her other side and Scott was on the two-seater by himself.

"There were a lot of cute boys at the game," Millie commented to her sister.

Hilary rolled her eyes. "You're too young to think about boys."

"I am not!" Millie argued.

Hilary turned to me, her eyebrows raised. "Don't you think she's too young?"

I just shrugged, not wanting to get into it with them. One of the perks of having a brother was that there was no girl drama, so I never had to deal with this stuff.

"I'm not too young," Millie huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

Before Hilary could say anything else, the front door opened and in walked Nathan. We silently watched him as he made his way into the living room with his red football bag slung on his shoulder. Nathan looked up from the floor to see our stares.

"Hey, guys," Nathan greeted our cousins with a smile and wave.

"Nathan!" Scott exclaimed, sitting up on the couch. "Can we play Madden?"

Nathan adjusted his bag on his shoulder. "Maybe after dinner."

Scott nodded and slouched on the couch again, turning his attention back to the TV.

"Nathan, don't you agree that Millie is too young for boys?" Hilary asked with a coy smile.

"Definitely," Nathan replied seriously as he walked by the couch, toward the stairs. "Boys are trouble, you should just stay away from them forever."

" *Nathan!* " Millie whined, throwing her head back in annoyance.

My brother chuckled before jogging up the stairs, presumably to throw his bag in his room. He had obviously already showered in the locker room since his hair was damp when he walked in.

Mom popped her head in the living room doorway. "Did Nathan just walk in?" she asked.

"Yeah, he just went upstairs," I said, turning to face her.

"Okay, dinner is ready," Mom announced before heading back to the kitchen.

Nathan bounded down the steps just as we got up from the couches to head into the kitchen. He changed out of his t-shirt and sweatpants and into a black and red flannel with dark, fitted jeans, his hair neatly pushed back.

"Dinner ready?" he asked, coming up next to me.

I nodded. "Yeah."

He was acting strangely calm and normal considering he just lost a game which was so *not* normal for Nathan. However, I didn't comment on it. I'd rather him be like this than be a mess for the rest of the day.

Nathan stayed calm and casual throughout dinner, making small talk with our Uncle who was seated beside him. No one mentioned the game, or even football at all, which I was grateful for.

After dinner, I headed to my room to get ready to go to Sam's. I was going to be staying the night with him at his house, so I packed clothes and other necessities into a backpack. As I was packing, Nathan came into my room without knocking. I didn't comment on it though.

"You heading out soon?" Nathan asked me, closing the door behind him.

"In a few minutes," I answered.

Nathan nodded, putting his hands on his hips. "Just be careful, okay? It makes me nervous that I don't know where you're going to be or who you'll

be with."

"I'll be fine," I assured him. "Don't worry about it."

Nathan let out a humorless chuckle. "That doesn't make me less nervous, but thanks."

We were silent for a few moments before I decided to speak up.

"Are you okay?" I asked him. "With what happened today?"

Nathan sighed, taking a seat beside me on my bed.

"It's not the end of the world," he said, his voice void of emotion.

"I know it's not, but you've never seemed to know it's not," I said, raising my eyebrows.

"I just feel bad because everyone was blaming Brian," Nathan admitted, referencing the kicker who missed the extra-point.

"I can't believe he missed the extra-point," I said, shaking my head.

"He hasn't missed one all season, he was bound to eventually," Nathan replied. "Everyone's allowed to mess up sometimes, it's up to the team to be able to cover for our teammates' mistakes."

"You're right," I agreed.

"Do you know how many passes I've missed this season?" Nathan asked. "Too many to count. Brian has missed one kick, it's not the end of the world."

"You know you're allowed to make mistakes too, right?" I asked him, causing him to look down at his lap.

"I can't though, the team relies on me," he said with a sigh. "I don't care if they blame shit on me, but I don't want them doing it to each other. It's not Brian's fault we lost today."

I smiled at him. "You're a good captain, Nate."

He looked up at me, giving me a questioning look.

"You understand what being a team means," I explained. "While everyone else is quick to place the blame on someone, you don't. You're a leader."

"I guess," he muttered, looking back down at his lap. "I just hate that it was against Knight."

I didn't comment on that.

"Whatever, when we play them again in the playoffs, I'll kick his ass," Nathan added, his tone firm and determined. "There's no way I'm losing to him twice in one season."

I could see the fire in his eyes. Although Nathan was keeping a calm exterior, I could now tell he was fuming about the loss. Even though he wasn't showing it, Nathan's hatred for the Knights, more specifically Sam, grew deeper today. And the idea of that unsettled me.

My phone buzzed with a text from Sam, letting me know he was at the spot we agreed to meet at. The spot was only a few houses down since he didn't want me walking too far when it was getting dark out, but it was far enough that Nathan wouldn't be able to see who was picking me up. I hadn't spoken to Sam since the day before, not even to congratulate him on his win.

"I gotta go," I told Nathan, standing up from my bed. He looked up at me.

"Your *man* is here?" he asked, standing up as well.

I nodded. "Remember I'm at Pete's *because we are picking Secret Santa names,"* I told him my lie so that we were on the same page with that.

"Right," Nathan agreed, following me down the stairs.

My parents were in the kitchen with my Aunt and Uncle, sitting at the table and sipping on red wine. My mother's eyes snapped to Nathan and me as the two of us entered the room.

"I'm off to Pete's," I said with a wave.

"Okay, honey," Mom said. "You're staying there tonight?"

"Yeah," I replied before bidding everyone a goodbye and walking toward the front door with Nathan following me.

"Be careful," Nathan reminded me as I opened the door to leave.

"I'll be *fine* ," I insisted.

Nathan looked at if he didn't believe me, but refrained from saying anything else. I waved to him before walking out the door and down the sidewalk to where I saw Sam's car idling on the side of the road. A wave of excitement washed over me as I approached the car, anxious to see him.

I opened the passenger's side door and slipped into the car with a smile on my face. Sam immediately leaned over to me and placed his lips on mine, before I could even shut the door. I smiled into the kiss before he pulled away with a smile of his own. I shut the car door and put my seat belt on and then we were off.

"I missed you," Sam admitted confidently.

I felt my cheeks burn. "I missed you too."

Sam smirked, placing his hand on my knee as he drove out of my neighborhood.

"Congrats on your win today, by the way," I told him, placing my hand over his.

"Thanks," he said awkwardly, as if not knowing how to take it.

"Seriously," I said. "Don't be weird."

Sam chuckled. "It just doesn't feel as good to win when Nathan played just as good as I did."

"Well, he's a good quarterback," I replied with a smirk.

"I know," Sam said, looking at me briefly.

"So," I began after a few moments of silence, "is Mae's family aware that we're... *together* ?"

Sam nodded. "They know."

I nodded, looking out the window.

"Well," Sam started again, "I think they do."

"Sam!" I shouted exasperatedly, widening my eyes.

"Mae just told me they would be fine with it, she never said if she told them or not," he explained.

I sighed, rubbing my face with my hand. I had been hoping that Mae's family already knew about our relationship so we wouldn't have to go through the awkwardness of explaining everything. Now, I had no idea what I would be walking into.

"It'll be fine," Sam assured me. "Quit being dramatic."

I rolled my eyes, turning to face Sam to give him a dirty look.

"I'm not being dramatic," I muttered, crossing my arms over my chest.

Sam gave me a look as if he didn't believe me, a smirk breaking out onto his face as he shook his head.

"Whatever, Drama Queen," he replied.

Soon enough the two of us ended up at Mae's parent's house. The house was larger than I expected it to be, showing that Mae's parents were obviously well off. It was white with tasteful black shutters and a porch that wrapped around the house. Sam parked the car next to the curb in front of the house, along with a few other cars.

"Who else is here?" I asked as the two of us got out of his car and started walking toward the house.

Sam shrugged. "Probably Mae's brother and sister."

He led me to the door and opened it without knocking. I was met with a gust of warm air as I entered the house behind Sam. I stayed close to him as he brought me through the large space, heading toward the dining room. Loud conversation was heard the closer we got to the room. Once we entered, all eyes were on us.

"Sam!" a short woman, who I assumed was Mae's mother, exclaimed. "I didn't even hear you come in!" She wrapped him up in a tight hug, making him bend down so she could place a kiss on his cheek.

"And you must be Mason," the woman said with a warm smile when she pulled away from Sam. She pulled me into a brief hug, the smile staying on her face.

"Mase, this is Danielle, Mae's mom," Sam introduced us.

"It's nice to meet you," I said kindly.

Sam motioned for me to follow him, presumably so he could introduce me to the rest of the family.

"Sam," a man greeted with a smiles, shaking his hand. He held out his hand for me to shake and I obliged.

"I'm John, Mae's father," he introduced himself.

"I'm Mason, nice to meet you," I replied. I didn't want to introduce myself as Sam's boyfriend, in case they weren't aware of it.

"Hey, guys!" Mae exclaimed as she entered the dining room, holding a bowl of mashed potatoes. Jonah was behind her, holding a plate that contained the turkey.

"Mason!" Lila screeched as she came in running behind her parents, throwing herself at me and wrapping her arms around my legs.

I chuckled, placing my hand on he back. "Hi Lila."

Eventually I was introduced to Mae's younger siblings, Maya and Jack. Jack was only a year older than Sam and me, in his first year of college, while Maya was in her early twenties. We sat down for dinner soon after I was introduced to the family. I sat next to Sam while Mae was across from me with Jonah next to her, across from Sam.

"So, Mason," John started, "Do you have any siblings?"

I nodded looking up to where he sat at the head of the table. "I have a twin brother."

"The other quarterback today is his brother," Mae added, looking at her father.

John sent me an impressed look. "He's a great player."

"He is," I agreed shyly, looking over at Sam.

"My dad *loves* football," Mae told me with a smile.

"It's always a good game when Sam plays your brother," John continued. "It's an actual competition, instead of Sam just dominating the whole game."

I let out an awkward laugh and nodded in agreement.

"So, you're dating your football rival's brother?" Jack asked in disbelief, looking at Sam as he sat on his other side.

"Yep," Sam replied, taking a long sip of water.

Jack laughed. "How does he feel about that?"

Sam and I looked at each other silently, neither of us knowing what to say. How do we tell these people that we are hiding our relationship from everyone we know?

Jack's eyes widened. "He doesn't know, does he?"

Sam shook his head. "No."

"How long have you guys been dating?" Maya asked.

"Almost a month," Sam replied quickly. It had completely slipped my mind that our relationship had been going on for that long. Maybe time just went by faster when I was with him.

"Okay, that's enough interrogating them," Mae said, sending each of her family members a warning look.

The rest of dinner went by smoothly. Mae's family stopped asking us questions about our relationship after she had warned them to stop. Her family was actually very nice to be around and they were all just as kind as her.

After having some dessert, Sam whispered in my ear.

"Wanna get out of here?"

***

Sam Knight

Christo, Jake, Owen, and some other guys from the team had been blowing up my phone all night. They were adamant about going out to celebrate our victory over the Warriors and no matter how many times I told them I wasn't going, they continued to pester me about it. I was ready to kill all of them.

Mason and I were just getting ready to leave Mae's parents's house. I had planned on taking him over to my house since I knew Mae and Jonah were going Black Friday shopping tonight and the kids were staying here with

their grandparents. There was no way I was going to miss an opportunity to have Mason all to myself.

"We're going to get going," I announced, causing all eyes to be on Mason and me.

Danielle got up to give each of us a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you both so much for coming."

"Thanks for having us," Mason said kindly, a sweet smile on his face.

We said goodbye to everyone and headed toward the front door, Jonah following behind us. I sighed and turned to face him, giving Mason the keys so he could go start the car.

"What?" I asked in an annoyed tone.

"I know you're taking Mason back to the house," Jonah said, causing me to roll my eyes.

"Okay? That wasn't a secret," I answered.

Jonah gave me a serious look. "Just be good and be safe."

I nodded. "I will," I said impatiently.

Jonah looked away from me awkwardly. "There's condoms in my dresser, please use–"

"I have my own," I cut him off. "You don't need to tell me to use them. I *know* ."

Jonah sighed, looking back at me. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

I bid him a goodbye before turning on my heel and heading out to my car where Mason was seated in the passenger's seat.

"Jonah was just reminding me to use protection," I told Mason jokingly when I got in the driver's seat.

Mason let out a short laugh. "Seriously?"

"I wish I was kidding," I replied, pulling the car away from the curb.

My phone started buzzing in the cup holder a few moments later. I groaned, already assuming it was one of my friends trying to force me to go out tonight. Mason tilted the phone so he could see the caller ID.

"It's Christo, do you want to answer it?" Mason asked.

I shook my head. "No, he's been bugging me all night."

"Bugging you about what?" he asked, shutting the ringer off on my phone.

"The team wants to go out tonight," I explained. "To celebrate the win."

"Why don't you want to go out with them?"

"Because I'd rather be with you," I answered honestly and I swore I saw his cheeks turn pink.

Mason smiled at me, but didn't say anything. We arrived at my house shortly after and wasted no time getting inside. I led Mason upstairs to my room and placed his backpack down on my floor before grabbing the back of his head and smashing his lips to mine, causing him to let out a quiet moan.

I moved my hands to his cheeks and walked him to my bed, lowering him so that I was hovering above him. Mason wrapped his legs around my waist and pulled my face closer to his, deepening the kiss. He tugged on my shirt, signaling for me to pull it off. We both discarded our shirts onto the floor and Mason moved to switch positions so that he was straddling me. I smirked as he brought his lips back down to mine and tugged on my hair. I let out a quiet groan as his fingers continued to play with my hair and his tongue found its way into my mouth.

Being like this with him was pure bliss and nothing could ruin it. I moved my hands down to his waist, and went for the button on his jeans.

"Hey, I told you–"

The voice of someone who barged into my room forced Mason and I apart. Mason jumped so far he nearly fell on the floor.

Christo stood in my doorway with his mouth hung open and his eyes nearly popping out of his head. I looked to Mason, who wore a similar expression, before looking back to Christo. I was breathing heavily as I lied back on my bed, unsure of what I should do. The three of us stayed silent, no one moving an inch. Christo looked as if he was going to pass out so I decided to speak up.

"Hey."

**

Thanks for reading!

What did you think about Nathan's reaction to losing? What about Mason and Sam's Thanksgiving dinner? And what about Christo walking in on them? How do you think he's going to react?

Let me know!

32

Sam Knight

"Hey? *Hey?* " Christo exclaimed. " *That's* what you have to say right now?"

I looked over to Mason to see that he was staring down at his lap with his arms timidly crossed over his chest, trying to hide himself from Christo. He was obviously uncomfortable with the situation and unaware about what we should do, so I would handle it so he wouldn't have to.

"What else would I have to say?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

Christo looked at me as if he wanted to strangle me.

"How about explaining what the *fuck* is going on," Christo said, looking pained as he spoke.

I sighed, rolling my eyes. "There's not much to explain. You saw what you saw."

Christo's eyes seemed to bug out of his head even more, which I didn't think was possible. He started to say something before stopping and looking as if he was searching his brain for the right words to say. He shook his head, covering his face with his hand.

"I'm so confused right now," Christo mumbled, his voice muffled by his hand.

I sighed and stood up from the bed, grabbing my shirt from the floor and throwing it back on. I tossed Mason his shirt to which he quickly put it back on to cover up.

"Listen," I said with another sigh, grabbing Christo's attention. "You can't tell anyone about this."

"Obviously!" Christo exclaimed loudly, throwing his hands in the air. "Do you understand how bad it would be if anyone knew?"

I rolled my eyes. " *Obviously.* "

I made my way out of my room, signaling for Christo to follow me. The two of us headed downstairs and into the kitchen. I grabbed myself a water bottle from the fridge before turning to face Christo, who was giving me an annoyed look.

"What is going on with you and Mason?" Christo asked seriously.

"Chris–" I started.

"Cut the bullshit, Sam," Christo cut me off. "Tell me the truth."

I sighed, taking a sip of my water. "He's my boyfriend."

Christo's eyes widened. "So, you guys aren't just hooking up?"

I shook my head.

Christo nodded, looking down a the floor as if he as unsure on what he should say next. It was like all of his annoyance left his body and now he was just filled with confusion.

"You can hate me for being gay or dating Mase or whatever–"

"Shut up," Christo cut me off harshly. "I don't hate you and I've had a feeling you were gay for a while."

My eyes widened and I nearly choked on my water. "You have?"

He nodded. "I could tell you weren't really into the girls you've been with and I've *seen* you check out guys before."

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked curiously.

Christo just shrugged. "I figured you would tell me when you wanted me to know."

I nodded and hummed in agreement, taking another sip of my water.

Christo cleared his throat. "Are you happy with him?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "I'm really happy."

"Good," Christo said with a nod. "I'm happy for you."

Although he said he was happy, his face was telling me something else. He still looked uncomfortable and confused about the entire situation, no happiness detected.

"It just makes things complicated that it's with him," Christo continued.

"The only people it complicates things for are me and him," I told him with my eyebrows raised. "Everyone else can fuck off."

"You're right," Christo agreed. "But you know how everyone would react. It wouldn't be pretty."

I let out a humorless laugh at his words. It definitely wouldn't be pretty when others started finding out, but that wasn't something we had to worry about yet. All I cared about at this moment was Mason.

"They'll have to find out eventually," I said with a shrug.

Christo's eyes widened. "You're not seriously planning on telling anyone? Are you?"

I gave him an annoyed look. "We aren't going to date in secret forever. After the football season is over, we're done hiding."

Before Christo could reply, light footsteps made their way down the stairs and into the kitchen. We both looked over to the doorway to see Mason timidly poke his head in. I smiled softly at him and motioned for him to come in.

"Everything okay?" Mason asked quietly as he came to stand beside me.

"Everything's fine," I assured him, looking over to Christo.

"Yeah, it's all good, Little Maloney," Christo said, smiling widely at him.

I tossed my arm around Mason's shoulders and pulled him closer to me. He resisted slightly at first, but quickly relaxed into my side.

"So," Christo started, "I guess I should go tell the guys you're not coming tonight."

I rolled my eyes. "Like I told you a million times?"

"Well, now I know why!" he defended himself.

Mason chuckled lightly at Christo, shaking his head. We watched at Christo headed out of the kitchen and didn't say a word until the door was shut and he was outside.

"You need to start locking your door," Mason said, giving me a light shove.

I blew out a humorless laugh. "Yeah, I really do."

We were silent for a few moments before I decided to speak up again.

"So..." I trailed. "Should we go back upstairs and finish what we started?"

Mason smirked, his eyes darkening with lust as he grabbed me by the arm and started pulling me toward the stairs.

***

Mason Maloney

The bed was empty when I woke up the next morning. In my half-asleep daze, I looked around the room for Sam, but he was nowhere to be found. I got up, pulling my boxers on from the floor, and tossed Sam's shirt on

before peeking my head out of his room to be sure no one else was in the house.

There was music coming from downstairs, that I was sure was Sam considering it was playing Queen. I followed the sound of the music into the kitchen where I saw Sam munching on a bowl of cereal, dressed and ready for the day.

"Morning," he said, his mouth full of food.

"Gross," I replied, a sleepy rasp still heard in my voice. I sat down across from him at the table, placing my chin in my hand.

"Want some?" Sam asked before taking another bite.

I shook my head. Sam quickly finished his cereal and got up to rinse out his bowl and place it in the dishwasher.

"I have to get going," Sam told me as he walked back to the table.

"What?" I asked, confused. Where the hell was he going?

"I have to go somewhere," he vaguely explained.

"Were you just going to leave me sleeping up in your room?" I asked, giving him an annoyed look.

He sighed. "I was going to leave you a note. I didn't want to wake you up, even though it's passed noon now."

"Where are you going?" I asked curiously, standing up from my seat.

Sam looked away from me as he spoke. "I just have somewhere to be."

The way he was acting had me thinking of the worst. He obviously didn't want me to know where he was going. Could that mean he was seeing someone else? Was he cheating on me? The thoughts running through my mind worried me and sent me back into my insecurities.

"Why are you lying to me?" I asked in annoyance, crossing my arms over my chest.

Sam shook his head and let out a sigh. "Mase, come on."

"What? You don't even want to tell me where you're going!"

"I will eventually," he reasoned, reaching out to me. "Just not now."

I didn't say anything as I glared at him and made my way back up to his room. I could hear him let out a groan as he followed me up the stairs. I ripped his shirt off of my body and pulled the clothes that I packed in my bag on.

"Do you want a ride home?" Sam asked, leaning against his dresser.

"I'll walk," I said, facing away from him as I put on my shirt.

"Mason," Sam said in a warning tone.

"Don't try to tell me what to do," I argued, turning to face him. "I'm fine walking."

"It's too far," Sam replied calmly. His calm tone only made me more annoyed.

"I thought you had somewhere to be," I spat.

Sam gave me a hardened stare. "Mase, please don't be like this."

"I'm fine walking," I said in a final tone. "I'll see you at work tomorrow."

Sam tensed and looked down at the floor. "Actually, I got Sandy to cover my shift for tomorrow, I can't come in."

I narrowed my eyes at him in a scowl. "When were you going to tell me this?"

"It slipped my mind?" he said, trying to sound innocent.

I shook my head and started walking out of his room, only to be stopped when he put his hand on my shoulder.

"I don't want you to leave while you're mad at me," he said, his face giving me a pleading look.

"Too bad," I said, shaking his hand off of my shoulder and leaving the room.

Part of me knew I was overreacting and that I should just trust Sam. He had given me no reason not to trust him. However, the other part of me was still so insecure and afraid that Sam wasn't as into me as I was for him. While I willed for that to be untrue, I couldn't tear the thought from the back of my mind.

***

I was surprised to see Nathan sitting alone on the couch when I stepped into my house. He sat back with his feet kicked up on the table, watching highlights from an NFL game that aired yesterday.

"Hey," Nathan greeted when he saw me walk in. "How was Thanksgiving with *your man* ?"

"Good," I said with a sigh, plopping down next to him. He turned to face me with a confused look, muting the TV.

"Why do you look so annoyed then?" he asked.

"Because boys are stupid," I told him with a serious expression.

Nathan's eyes widened. "Did he hurt you? Mason, I swear to–"

"Stop it," I cut him off. "Nothing happened, just forget it."

"Nothing happened?" he asked with a slight laugh. "That hickey on your neck says something did."

I really needed to stop letting Sam do that to me, but when I was around him, it was hard to think straight.

"Shut up," I muttered, crossing my arms over my chest.

"So," Nathan started. "What's he like?"

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Your guy," Nathan clarified. "What's he like?"

"Why?" I asked, still confused. I never expected Nathan to actually want to hear about my love life. It wasn't that I didn't think he cared, but I didn't expect for him to want any details.

"Well, since I can't meet him, I want to know what he's like so I can tell if he's good enough for you or not," Nathan explained with a nonchalant shrug.

"He's..." I trailed, trying to find the right words to say. "He's just my *person* ."

"Your... person?" Nathan said, sounding confused.

"Like, have you ever met someone and thought you didn't know how you spent your whole life *not* knowing them?" I tried to explain. My feelings for Sam seemed so unattainable that I couldn't even find the right words to describe how I felt.

Nathan shook his head. "No."

"Well, that's what it feels like with him," I said. "It's like he's my better half and I'm his. We each make up for each other's shortcomings. We balance each other out. We're good for each other," I continued.

Nathan just nodded, willing me to continue.

"He's so confident and sure of himself, he makes *me* feel sure of myself," I elaborated. "He makes me feel loved and wanted and secure. I didn't know

that it was ever possible to feel that way because of someone."

Voicing these feelings out to Nathan made me realize that if Sam really was cheating on me, or if he didn't feel the same was as I did, that I would lose all of that. I would lose the confidence I had gained and the security I felt. I would lose *my person* . I knew in my heart, I wouldn't be able to handle that.

"Sounds like a good guy," Nathan commented casually.

I smiled slightly. "I think you would like him if you got to know him."

I knew I was treading on dangerous territory with that comment, but I believed it to be true. There was no doubt in my mind that if Nathan and Sam stopped being at odds with each other, they could actually be good friends. It would take some time, but it would happen.

Nathan smiled back. "I bet I would."

**

We hit 500k reads 😱 Thank you so much!

What did you think about Christo's reaction? Was it expected? What about Mason and Sam's argument and Mason's conversation with Nathan?

Please let me know in the comments :)

33

Mason Maloney

I rolled over in bed when my phone started blaring on my bed-side table. Without even looking at the caller-ID, I snatched my phone and held it up to my ear before answering.

"Hello?" I mumbled in a tired, raspy voice.

"Did you just wake up?" Sam asked confusedly.

"Yeah... why? What time is it?" I asked, rubbing the sleepiness out of my eyes.

"It's almost noon. I was just calling to see if you needed a ride to work," Sam explained as my eyes widened.

I sprung from my bed. "Shit!"

I rummaged around my room, looking for my shoes, before pulling clothes out of my dresser. I held my phone between my ear and my shoulder as I hopped helplessly around my room, trying to pull a pair of jeans on.

"So... I guess I'll pick you up?" Sam said, sounding slightly unsure.

"Please," I replied, putting my other leg in my pants. "Wait, I thought you weren't coming in today?"

"I finished up early this morning so I could make our shift," Sam explained with a yawn.

I smiled at his words, but didn't comment on them.

"Okay, I'll see you in a bit," I said.

"Okay, I'll see you in ten," Sam said before hanging up. I tossed my phone onto my bed before pulling a shirt on over my head and running my fingers through my hair to tame it.

After grabbing my phone from my bed, I dashed down the stairs to get something to eat before Sam arrived. The house was empty, it usually was on Saturday mornings, and I was actually relieved that Nathan wasn't here to give me a ride to work. After scarfing down some cereal, I received a text from Sam letting me know he was here.

I hastily threw myself into the passenger's seat of Sam's car and fumbled with the seat belt before buckling up.

"Rough morning?" Sam asked as he pulled out of my driveway.

"I can't believe I slept through my alarm," I replied with a groan, resting my head on the window.

"Anyway, remember when you asked me out on a date to the movies?" Sam asked with a smirk, looking over at me briefly.

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. "Yeah?"

"I was thinking we could go tonight," he said. "If you want to."

"You don't have anywhere to be?" I dared to ask. I knew I was being unfair, but I couldn't stop myself.

Sam just rolled his eyes. "No."

"Then I would love to," I said, lifting my head from the window and looking straight ahead.

"I was thinking we should go kind of late," Sam told me, taking one hand off the wheel and placing it on my knee.

"Yeah, we probably should," I agreed, putting my hand over his.

Eventually we reached the bakery and headed inside together. Charlene was standing at a table, talking to some customers while Sandy stood at the register talking to Rachel. The two girls didn't even notice us as Sam and I walked in, too engrossed in whatever gossip they were going on about. Sam and I made our way to the kitchen and he handed me my apron before putting his own on.

"When did you two get here?" Rachel asked with an eyebrow raised as the two of us stepping out of the kitchen.

"Just got here," I replied blandly.

"We were just talking about what sorts of hair styles are most attractive," Sandy informed us, as if we cared. "Rachel thinks guys are into girls with edgier looks and I think they like girlier ones," she said exaggeratedly, placing her hand on her chest.

"Sounds nice," I lied as she moved away from the register so I could log on.

"What do you think, Sam?" Rachel asked flirtatiously, stepping closer to him.

"Uh..." he trailed, looking to me for help. My eyes shot to him, silently telling him to not answer that. I didn't want to hear about anything Sam found attractive about girls.

"It probably depends on the guy," Sam eventually said, his voice sounding smooth like he wasn't just caught off-guard a few moments ago.

"What do you prefer?" Sandy pressed further, twirling her long, black hair on her finger.

I gave Sam a stern look as he glanced at me briefly. His eyes softened at me, as if telling me to chill out.

"Honestly? I don't even think about a person's hair when I'm attracted to them," Sam answered truthfully. I could only assume he was telling the

truth because I knew there was nothing special about my own hair, and he seemed pretty attracted to me.

"What about you, Mase?" Sandy asked, looking over to be briefly before setting her gaze back on Sam.

"No one cares," I told her with a sigh. "Aren't you guys supposed to be leaving now? Our shift started."

The girls didn't respond to me as they continued sending Sam flirtatious looks. Eventually they put their aprons away and bid us a goodbye and left the bakery.

"You make them so much less tolerable," I complained to Sam, leaning forward with my elbows on the counter.

Sam let out a laugh. "How is it my fault?"

"They're only like that because you're hot," I told him as he came to stand beside me. "They used to be more chill."

"Sorry if my hotness bothers you," Sam replied with a smug look, crossing his arms over his chest.

I rolled my eyes. "It only bothers me when *other* people notice how hot you are."

Sam shook his head playfully. "You're selfish."

I shrugged. "So what?"

Sam chuckled, looking at the customers to make sure no one was watching us, before leaning closer to me, putting his mouth against my ear.

"Your hotness *really* bothers me, if you know what I mean," he whispered seductively.

Having caught on to his sexual innuendo, I scoffed and shoved his shoulder to push him away from me. He just let out another chuckle, showing off his

dazzling smile.

"Get to work, pervert," I said, which only caused him to laugh more.

"I love it when you boss me around," Sam replied with a smirk before heading into the kitchen to grab a rag to wipe some tables down.

I couldn't stop myself from staring at his ass as he bent over the table to reach the other side with the rag.

Maybe *I* was the pervert.

***

When Sam drove the two of us back to his place after work, neither of us expected Christo to be there waiting for us. He was sitting on the couch in the living room with Lila when Sam and I walked in. We each gave him a confused look as he waved to us.

"What are you doing here?" Sam asked, pointing toward Christo.

Christo just shrugged. "I was bored and you weren't here so I waited for you."

He stood up from the couch, much to the dismay of a protesting Lila, and made his way to the stairs, presumably to go up to Sam's room.

Sam shook his head in annoyance as he followed behind Christo. I made sure to wave to Lila before heading up the stairs after the others. By the time I got up the stairs, Sam and Christo were already in Sam's room.

"Are you mad at me? What, am I cockblocking you?" I heard Christo ask as I entered the room.

Sam sighed. "No."

"He's not?" I asked jokingly with a slight laugh, walking in through the doorway.

"You guys can do whatever you were planning to do," Christo offered, sitting down on Sam's bed. "Pretend I'm not even here," he continued, holding his hands up expressively.

"What if we were going to have sex?" Sam asked, placing his hands on his hips. "You would want to be here for that?"

"Not particularly," Christo admitted. "But I'm lonely."

I couldn't hold back my laughter any longer. The two boys glanced at me with unreadable expressions as I doubled over in laughter at their exchange.

"You're ridiculous," I told Christo, sitting down beside him on the bed.

"Why can't you hang out with Jake or Owen? Or literally anyone else but us?" Sam questioned, standing in front of us.

Christo let out a groan, throwing his head back exasperatedly. "Jake is mean to me and Owen sides with him."

"Get over it," Sam told him. "Because Mason and I have plans."

Christo looked over at me. "What are you two doing?"

"Movies," I replied to which Christo's eyes widened in excitement.

"Can I go? Please?" he begged like a child.

Sam's response was instant. "No."

"Come on, Sam!" Christo whined, throwing his hands up. "If I'm there and we see people we know, no one will suspect anything is going on with you two."

I looked up at Sam who wore a grim expression on his face. Christo had a point, and Sam knew it, though he would never admit it. Sam looked to me for help, but I just shrugged.

"I don't care if he comes," I said casually, causing Christo to let out a cheer.

"At least your boyfriend is nice to me," Christo said to Sam, raising his eyebrows.

Sam let out a frustrated sigh. "Fine, whatever. Come with us."

Before anything else could be said, Sam's phone started ringing, He pulled the phone out of his pocket and checked the caller-ID before looking back up at Christo and me briefly.

"I have to take this, I'll be right back," he said before rushing out of his room and down the stairs.

I couldn't help but think of how odd that was. He never usually left the room to take a phone call, not caring if I heard what he was talking about. This only made grow paranoid, thinking he was hiding something from me. I usually didn't care about whoever he talked to because I trusted him, but he had raised my suspicions before and now I didn't know what to think.

"Why do you look like that?" Christo asked in a confused tone.

"Like what?" I let out quietly.

"Like *that* ," he said, pointing to my face. "Like you want to throw up."

"I don't," I replied, setting my gaze on him.

"Yes, you do," he argued.

"Just drop it, Christo," I muttered in annoyance, pushing myself off of the bed to sit at Sam's desk chair.

After a few moments of silence with Christo, Sam came back into the room. I looked up at him and saw how casual he looked, not sharing the same paranoia that I felt. That only made me feel worse.

"Everything okay?" I asked him, standing up from the desk chair.

He nodded. "Everything's fine. You guys ready to go or what?"

Christo immediately launched himself off the bed and headed downstairs when Sam announced he was ready to go, leaving us alone for the first time since we had gotten to the house.

"Hey," Sam said, grabbing onto my arm as I moved to walk past him out of his room. "Are you alright? You look a little upset."

I mustered up the best smile I could, despite how I felt at that moment. "I'm fine. Let's go."

Sam gave me a curious look, clearly not believing what I had just said, but he didn't press me any further. He released my arm and the two of us made our way out to the car where Christo had perched himself into the passenger's seat. Sam started shaking his head at him as Christo looked up to make eye contact.

"Why are you shaking your head?" Christo asked, opening the door so we could hear him.

"Backseat," was all Sam said.

"No, I–"

"Backseat," Sam cut him off, pointing to the back of his car. Christo huffed but got out of the car anyway to allow me to have the passenger's seat.

"Just because he's your boyfriend doesn't mean he gets the front all the time," Christo complained from behind me.

"Yes, it does," Sam argued as he pulled out of the driveway.

"That's not fair," Christo replied and I could tell by the tone of his voice that he had a pout on his face.

"You owe me," I told him, turning around to face him. "I let you crash our date."

He was silent for a moment before nodding. "You're right."

I turned back around as Sam let out a scoff, but didn't say anything.

The movie theater we decided to go to was a little ways out of town. Christo complained just about every five minutes about how long the drive was taking, but it turned out to only be about half an hour away.

"You can sit by yourself in the theater," Sam said as the three of us walked through the parking lot to the building.

Christo's eyes widened and he looked as if he was about to protest before I cut him off.

"Don't be mean Sam," I said, giving him a knowing look.

Sam looked down at me with a blank expression before letting out a sigh and nodding at me.

"Fine," Sam mumbled, sending Christo a glare.

"There's a reason I always liked you, Little Maloney," Christo said, tossing his arm around my shoulder with a wide smile on his face. It didn't take long for Sam to shove Christo away from me and stand between us.

"Chill, Sam. I'm not trying to steal your man," Christo said, shoving Sam's arm.

Sam rolled his eyes. "The last time you hung onto him like that, you wouldn't let go and then you spilled beer on him."

Christo squinted, looking as if he was scouring his brain for the memory of that occurrence.

"I don't even remember that happening," he finally said.

I laughed, shaking my head. "That's because you were drunk off your ass."

Christo snapped his fingers. "That explains it."

The three of us made our way into the building and bought our movie tickets. Sam insisted on paying for mine which, funnily enough, helped settle my nerves about him hiding something from me. Maybe it wasn't even a big deal and it had nothing to do with me. I was just being paranoid and overthinking. I hated that about myself.

When the movie ended, Sam was gushing about how much he loved it and I couldn't help but smile at every word he said. He looked so happy and carefree, being my favorite version of himself.

"Rami Malek just played a really good Freddie," Sam said after dropping Christo off. "Like everything about it was just so good. Some of the stuff was inaccurate, but I don't even care."

I chuckled, smiling widely at him. "It was good," I agreed. "I'm happy you liked it so much."

"I *loved* it," he corrected with a toothy grin, reaching over to place his hand on my thigh.

As he drove away from Christo's house, I noticed he was going in the opposite direction of his own house. I turned to give him a confused look, but he didn't notice as he continued to smile as he drove.

"Sam?" I grabbed his attention.

"Hm?" he hummed, turning to face me briefly, his smile never faltering.

"Are we not staying at your house tonight?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. That caused his beautiful smile to fall.

"Something came up," he muttered. "I have to leave early tomorrow."

"You couldn't have told me this earlier?" I asked rudely, my annoyance shining through.

"Mase, I'm sorry," Sam said softly.

"Where are you going?" I dared to ask, knowing he wouldn't give me a straight answer.

"It's just a thing I have to go–"

I let out a humorless laugh and crossed my arms over my chest, staring out the window.

" *Mase* ," Sam pleaded. "Don't be mad at me."

I didn't answer him and the two of us continued the drive to my house in silence until Sam spoke up again.

"Listen, I'm sorry. Can you just say something?" Sam asked as he parked the car outside my house.

I said nothing.

Sam glared at me and rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "Fine be a baby about it."

I ground my teeth and sent him a scowl. "I just don't see the point in talking about it when you're going to lie to me about it anyway."

"No–"

"Don't even deny it," I said. "You've 'had somewhere to go' before and have given me no explanation about it."

"I just don't see why you need to know exactly where I am all the time," Sam argued, crossing his arms.

"I don't," I replied. "But you're being secretive on purpose."

Sam didn't say anything because he knew I was right. I scoffed and shook my head, taking my seat belt off and opening the car door.

"So you're just going to leave while you're still mad at me?" Sam asked incredulously.

"Yep," I replied, not even looking back at him as I slammed the car door shut and made my way up to my empty house.

**

So I just wanted to address something real quick. Quite a few people have voiced their disappointment in the lack of smut in this book so I wanted to tell you why I will not write it just so you understand where I'm coming from.

1. One of my main focuses in writing this book is to make sure I don't fetishize Sam and Mason or gay relationships in general. I don't think their explicit sex scenes are important enough to the story to include because that's not what the story is about.

2. I don't want this story to have a mature rating. I want this story to be for everyone to read. If it gets a mature rating it can be taken off of certain ranking lists and Wattpad can make some of my chapters private which would mean everyone who reads would have to follow me to read the private chapters. I like the idea of the story being accessible for everyone and for all ages.

3. I'm an adult and the thought of writing sex scenes about minors doesn't sit well with me (Sam and Mason are 17). I insinuate they do have sex because I know that's part of relationships, but I don't like the idea of writing an explicit scene. I also know that quite a few readers are young and I don't like the idea of writing explicit scenes for minors to read either.

So no, I will not be making a private book for explicit scenes and I won't have someone else write the scenes for me.

Sorry for the disappointment, but those are my reasons and they won't change.

ANYWAY, what did you think of the chapter?

What did you think about Christo butting in on Mason and Sam's date? What do you think Sam is hiding? Do you think Mason is being too paranoid?

Let me know!

Sorry for the long author's note :)

34

Mason Maloney

Spirits were down in the halls at school on Monday morning after the Warriors' devastating loss to the Knights. I thought everyone was being dramatic. After all, it was just a football game. However, members of the student body didn't seem to care about just how dramatic they were being as they sulked around the school. I had an actual reason for my own sulking and that was that I hadn't spoken to Sam since I left his car on Saturday night. No texts or phone calls, nothing.

Bella appeared no different than the rest of the student body when she made her way to my locker with a pout on her face after I had opened it up. I didn't even look over to greet her as I arranged my things and took what I needed for class.

"Are you working today?" Bella asked me, leaning against the locker next to mine.

I shook my head, slamming my locker shut. "No, I have today off."

"Perfect," she replied. "I need you and the boys to come over."

"For what?" I asked confusedly, leaning back against my locker.

"There's this guy–"

I groaned, throwing my head back into the locker and cutting her off. She raised her eyebrows at me with an offended look on her face, placing her hands on her hips.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"You get so *obsessed* with guys that you like," I told her, a strange look on my face.

"That is *not* true," Bella countered, crossing her arms over her chest.

I let out a humorless laugh. "It is, and you don't even realize it, which makes it worse."

"Ross!" Bella exclaimed as she saw Ross at the end of the hallway. He hastily made his way over to us with his eyes cast downward.

"Do you have to yell my name for the whole world to hear?" Ross asked Bella in annoyance.

She ignored him, changing the subject. "Do I get obsessive about guys I like?"

Ross moved his eyes from Bella to me, giving me a look as if asking for my help.

"Is she joking?" he asked to which I burst out in laughter. Bella just let out a huff of annoyance and shoved Ross's shoulder.

"I hate you guys," she muttered. "You're still coming over tonight though."

"We are?" Ross asked, looking to me once again.

"I need guy advice before I go out with him this weekend!" Bella stated as if it was obvious. Ross didn't say anything so Bella let out another huff of annoyance before sauntering off down the hallway.

"What is up with her?" Ross asked me once Bella was out of hearing distance.

I shook my head, letting out a breath. "I have no idea."

After a few moments, Pete met up with us and we told him about our plans later with Bella.

"She wants guy advice? From us?" Pete asked slowly, as if trying to make sense of this in his head.

"Yeah," I confirmed with a nod.

Pete shook his head in disbelief. "She's weird, but whatever."

I nodded in agreement with Pete before pulling my phone out of my pocket. I hated myself for it, but I was checking to see if Sam had sent me a message. He didn't. I sighed, shoving my phone deep into my pocket once again.

I knew I was fully capable of sending him a text, but part of me was still so annoyed with him for being so secretive with me. It wasn't his fault that I was still so insecure about our relationship, but he was adding to my insecurities by hiding things from me. I just wished he understood that without me having to go through the embarrassment of telling him.

I looked up from the floor just as Pete shoved Ross lightly as Liza walked by. Ross slyly waved to her and she gave him a shy smile with a wave of her own before continuing to walk away with her group of friends.

"Have you gotten with her yet?" Pete asked excitedly.

Ross rolled his eyes. "We talk."

I couldn't help but let out a laugh. "That makes you sound like such a fuckboy."

Pete nodded in agreement. "He's right, it does!"

Ross crossed his arms over his chest and gave Pete a stern look of annoyance before looking briefly over at me.

"We talk. Nothing else," Ross clarified.

"Like, not even a kiss?" Pete asked, sounding astonished.

"Not even a kiss," Ross confirmed.

"What are you waiting for!" Pete exclaimed. "She's going to get bored waiting around for you! You need to make a move. Fast."

It was then that I mentally checked out of the conversation. I saw Ross give Pete another annoyed look and decided to focus my attention elsewhere. My hand itched to reach into my pocket to check my phone again, but I knew it would be no use. If Sam hadn't texted me five minutes ago, there was a good chance that he still hadn't. But still, I allowed my hand to sliver deep down into my pocket and grab the device. It lit up when I brought the screen into my vision. Much to my surprise, there was a text from Sam which I frantically opened.

Are you free tonight?

I looked up at my friends to see that they were still talking about Ross's love life before looking back down at my phone to reply to Sam.

Going to Bella's

His reply was almost instant.

What about after?

Don't know how long it'll be

I sighed, wishing I could just cancel with Bella tonight to see Sam, but I knew she would be pissed at me. Not to mention, I would be a pretty shitty friend if I blew them off for my boyfriend every chance I got.

Okay. Just let me know. See you later (maybe).

I let out a light chuckle at his response.

See you later (maybe)

As I slipped my phone back into my pocket, the bell rang and students scattered around the halls to get to their first class. I bid each of my friends a goodbye before heading to my own class.

I sat down with a sigh and began thinking up excuses to get out of Bella's early tonight.

***

"So he's a college guy I met on Tinder," Bella said excitedly as the four of us sat around on the couches in her living room.

"You're talking to a college guy?" Pete asked in an exasperated tone.

Bella gave him a blank stare. "Isn't that what I just said?"

Pete looked up to the ceiling. "That's insanely stupid of you."

Before Bella could start arguing with Pete, I cut in.

"Tinder, really?" I asked, giving her a strange look to which she turned her attention to me.

"None of the guys at our school interest me," she explained. "And older guys are hotter."

I guess I couldn't really argue with her on that one, not that I would let her know I agreed with her.

"Have you met him though?" Ross asked in a concerned tone. "How do you know he's even real?"

"We've facetimed," Bella assured him. "He's really nice. I'm just nervous about going out with him. I haven't been on a real date ever. I don't want to scare him off."

Pete let out a rude snort. "That'll be hard for you."

Bella sent him a death glare before whipping a couch pillow at his head.

"No need to get violent!" Pete exclaimed.

"Anyways," Bella started, clearing her throat. "What should I wear? I want to look nice, but not like I'm trying too hard."

"Wear something sexy," Pete said teasingly to which she sent him another scowl.

I sighed. "No, wear something casual. He's most likely not going to notice anything about your outfit unless you dress like you're homeless."

"I agree with Mase," Ross said with a nod.

Pete rolled his eyes. "You guys are boring."

"If you're going to be annoying, just go," Bella said directly to Pete with a piercing gaze. He held his hands up in mock surrender.

"I'll shut up," he said.

"Okay," Bella started again, clapping her hands together. "What do I talk about? What if–"

"Bell," I stopped her, causing her to look over at me. "You need to chill. Just be yourself and it'll be fine."

Bella's insecurity about her date had me thinking of my own with Sam. It wasn't the same thing, but it was the same idea. We were both worried about driving the other people away. I was worried that Sam wasn't even really mine, and that he didn't really want me. Seeing Bella act this way made me realize how ridiculous I was being about my situation with Sam. All I had to do was *talk* to him, but I let my insecurities get in the way.

"Yeah, Bella," Ross continued for me. "I think if you focus too much on trying to impress him, it will feel unnatural. Just let the conversation flow."

Bella nodded with a serious look on her face. "What if... What if he wants to hook up after? Isn't that a thing on Tinder?"

Pete's eyes widened and he launched himself forward so that he was in front of Bella. She looked at him with a confused look.

"Do *not* sleep with him on the first date," Pete said seriously, shaking Bella by the shoulders. "That will send the wrong message. *Don't do it* ."

"Okay...?"

"You know what," Pete continued, "don't even kiss him."

Ross and I looked at each other in confusion briefly because of Pete's behavior. I couldn't understand why he was acting this way, but I didn't want to bring it up. It was obvious Ross was thinking the same thing as me.

Eventually we calmed Bella down enough so she was less nervous for her date on Saturday night. Although, I was sure I would be getting a frantic phone call the hour leading up to her date, but I would just deal with that then. Ross and I made a deal to go for a run later in the week, since we hadn't been since the time I got jumped and I really needed to improve my mile time.

It was only about six o'clock when the four of us just sat watching TV, done with whatever Bella needed us here for. After a few more moments, I excused myself to the bathroom so that I could call Sam. He answered the phone almost instantly.

"Hey," he said cheerfully. "I'm glad you called."

"Do you want to come pick me up?" I asked quietly, hoping no one would hear our conversation.

"Sure," he replied. "You're still at Bella's?"

"Yeah," I answered. "Do you know where it is?"

"Just share your location with me and I'll GPS it," Sam said.

"Okay, see you in a few," I told him before ending the call.

I made sure to send Sam my location before heading back out to the living room where my friends were. I reclaimed my spot next to Bella and leaned back on the couch. I let out a yawn before letting them know I would be leaving.

"I'm going to be heading out," I said, looking toward Bella.

"You're not going to stay for *The Bachelor* ?" Bella asked with doe like eyes. "Where are you going?"

I let out a sigh and scratched the back of my neck. "I told Sam I would help him practice some baking tonight," I lied.

Bella's expression hardened and she looked away from me for a moment before letting out a sigh and turning back to me.

"Look, I'm sorry for freaking out before about you hanging out with Sam," Bella surprisingly apologized. "I get that you two work together and have do to stuff sometimes."

I nodded. "Thanks."

"I still don't really like him," she said with a huff, crossing her arms and returning her gaze to the TV.

I let out a light chuckle and shook my head at her.

"I think he's pretty cool," Pete said with a shrug, earning a scowl from Bella.

"You would," she retorted.

"I think he's pretty cool too," Ross joked with a teasing smile. Bella just ignored him. The three of us chuckled together which caused Bella to take a deep breath as if trying not to yell at us.

Soon enough, I received a text from Sam letting me know he was here. I bid my friends a goodbye and let myself out of the house and into Sam's car that was sitting on the side of the road.

"Hey," he greeted me with a smile to which I smiled back.

Seeing him filled me with relief and settled my nerves. I was glad he wasn't angry with me or refusing to see me because I had gotten angry with him the other night. Sam pulled away from the curb and started driving down the street out of the neighborhood.

"So, I want to talk to you," Sam said in a serious tone after a few moments of silence.

"I figured," I replied, looking over at him. He was holding the steering wheel with two hands, his knuckles white from his firm grip.

My nerves spiked again as I looked at his demeanor. He looked stressed and tense, like whatever he had to say was a burden to keep to himself. I would be stuck in suspense until he let it out and I didn't know if it would be something I wanted to hear.

"I was going to take you to my place, but my family is home and I just want to talk to you without anyone around," Sam explained as he turned onto a main road.

I didn't say anything as Sam drove because by the way he sat in his seat, his posture nearly perfect without any casualness to it, I could tell that he was waiting to say what he wanted to say.

After a few minutes, we arrived in his empty school parking lot. Sam parked the car right next to the football field and I followed him as he got out of the car and started walking toward the bleachers. We sat together on the first row, keeping a minuscule distance between us, but any distance at all was too far for me.

"What did you want to say?" I decided to ask after we sat in silence for a few minutes, staring out at the field.

"You were right," Sam started, his voice tight. "I was being secretive with you and that was stupid of me."

I nodded, urging him to go on, but he stayed silent. I could tell he still had something on his mind. He played nervously with his hands in his lap and he wouldn't meet my gaze. He behavior only made me expect the worst.

I let out a loud sigh and stood up, causing him to glance up at me in confusion. I glared down at him with my jaw set tight.

"Just come out and say it, Sam," I spat angrily. He furrowed his eyebrows with a confused expression.

"What do you think I'm going to say?" he asked warily.

"Are you cheating on me or something?" I asked loudly before I could stop myself. Sam's eyes widened. "That's it, isn't it? I should have known."

I started walking away, but I was stopped when Sam's hand reached out and pulled on my arm to stop me.

"Mase–"

"Stop!" I exclaimed, ripping my arm free from his grasp. "I don't want you to lie to me anymore!"

I could tell he was getting annoyed with me by the way he ran his hand through his hair and tightly clenched his jaw.

"Can you ever let me get a damn word in?" he asked in an icy tone. "You're always jumping to conclusions and then won't let me talk."

"You weren't talking!" I yelled. "We were just sitting there while you continued to feel guilty and I was feeling like shit!"

"Maybe that's because whatever I have to say is actually really fucking difficult for me to say!" Sam yelled back before letting out a sigh and visibly calming down. "Can we just sit? I promise I'll talk."

I looked up at the sky briefly before nodding and taking a seat next to him on the bleachers, shivering as I came into contact with the cold metal.

"I wasn't being secretive because I was cheating on you," he assured me, placing his hand on my knee. "I'm sorry you thought that."

"Then what is it?" I asked, though it came out as a whisper. "Where were you going off to?"

Sam took a deep breath, looking at his hand on my knee before looking up at me, our eyes connecting.

"I was visiting my mom," he answered in a broken, raspy tone.

The way he said it had me thinking the worst. I had never known anything about Sam's parents other than the fact that they weren't in his life anymore.

"It's not what you're thinking," Sam said, being able to see my thoughts going through the look in my eyes. "She isn't sick or dying."

I let out a breath in relief that I didn't know I was holding.

"Then what is it?"

Sam looked down again, then out at the field before looking up at me. He took a deep breath and in a strong, yet still raspy tone he answered me.

"My mother is in prison."

**

IMPORTANT PLEASE READ:

Please be warned that next chapter will have a TRIGGER WARNING. I will post the warning at the beginning of the chapter. The triggering content won't be anything too graphic or detailed, but I still want to put the warning out there for anyone who needs it. *Please* take care of yourself and know your limits. Like I said, it will not be graphic, but please do what's right for you when deciding if you want to read or not. It will just be in the first scene so you can just skip that scene if you choose not to read.

Also, I just wanted to say that my last authors note was not meant to be condescending or to shame people who enjoy smut and I did not intend to make anyone feel bad for wanting it in this book. I just wanted to let everyone know *why* it wouldn't be part of this book, so please don't feel bad or anything.

OKAY, what did you think about the reveal about Sam's mom? I know some of you already guessed it, but were any of you shocked? What do you think she did to get into prison? And are there any theories about what happened to Sam's dad?

Let me know!

Sorry for the long authors note AGAIN. (I promise I won't make a habit of this).

35

TRIGGER WARNING: mentions depression, suicide, and drug use

Sam Knight

It was out in the open now, my harbored secret that was driving a wedge between Mason and me. Telling him had not taken a weight off of my chest since he sat there stunned, as if he was unsure of what to say. His breath seemed to be caught in his throat and his mind had turned blank.

Telling Mason about my mother was something I knew had to be done. I couldn't keep large parts of my life a secret from him if we were going to have a relationship. That's just not how life worked.

"Can you just say something?" I muttered impatiently, my eyes involuntarily narrowing at the stunned boy beside me.

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head as if trying to get some thoughts into his brain. "I just didn't expect that."

Mason looked at me with a soft, apologetic look on his face. His eyes gleamed with sympathy, sympathy I didn't want but would gladly take if it was coming from him. Anything was better than him storming off and never speaking to me again.

I took a deep breath, gearing myself up to start explaining the situation before Mason put his hand out to touch mine, stopping me.

"You don't have to say anything else," he told me with a worried look on his face. "I should have never accused you of anything–"

"Mase," I hushed him softly. "It's okay. I *need* to tell you this, to get it off my chest." I didn't want there to be any secrets between us and this was the biggest one I had. I needed to tell him.

Mason nodded, but didn't say anything else, urging me to go on. I didn't know why I had felt so nervous about telling him this before. Part of me was worried he would see me differently and want nothing to do with me, but another part of me didn't want him to judge my mother. She already felt bad enough for getting herself locked up.

"It's not much of a story," I started with a humorless laugh, looking down at my shoes, the laces split at the ends in the most annoying way. "It happened after my dad died."

I heard Mason let out a surprised gasp. My father's death wasn't a secret and I assumed most people around here knew about it, but no one ever spoke a word of it. It was too tragic.

"I didn't notice at the time, but my dad was getting really depressed about six years ago," I continued, looking up at Mason to see that I had his full attention. His hair fell on his forehead the way I like it, looking purposefully messy and making me want to run my fingers through it.

"One day after dinner, about five years ago, my father went up to my parents' room and the rest of us stayed downstairs," I said, feeling my voice get heavy. "It was me, Jonah, and my mom."

"A few minutes later," I paused, taking a deep breath before continuing, "there was a gunshot."

Mason gripped my hand tighter, bringing it up to his mouth for a chaste kiss while I took a long pause before clearing my throat and starting again.

"Mom and Jonah ran up the stairs and when I went to follow them, Jonah pushed me back and told me to stay downstairs," I said, looking down at our entwined hands. "About a second later my mom screamed like I had never heard anyone scream before."

It was true. The sound of her scream was so ear-piercing I remember my hair standing up on my arms when I heard it. After the initial scream, there were sobs that sounded like they weren't even coming from a human.

"I stood at the bottom of the stairs, trying to find the courage to go up there and see what was wrong," I said, my gaze meeting Mason's attentive one once again. "I saw Jonah literally holding my mom up with this look on his face I can't even describe. It was almost emotionless, like he wasn't even alive."

I paused again, the vivid memories coming back to me. Anytime I thought about this moment, it felt like it was happening all over again.

"He eventually put my mom down on the floor and ran down the stairs to call 911," I continued. "He made me sit in the kitchen so I wouldn't see when the paramedics brought our dad's body down, but I looked out when they arrived and saw them take him out on a stretcher with a sheet over him."

"I'm so sorry, Sam," Mason said sadly. "I know it doesn't help, but I'm *so* sorry."

I smiled at him and took my hand out of his so I could wrap my arm around his shoulder and give him a long kiss on the forehead, pushing his hair back with my other hand.

"It's okay," I said in a soothing tone. "It's better now. I never had to *see* what happened. Jonah kept me away from that. It probably would have been more traumatizing if I saw him dead in his bedroom with a bullet hole in his head."

I knew I was putting it bluntly, but that's how I handled talking about this situation. I couldn't sugar-coat it.

"I don't know why he did it when we were all home," I admitted. I couldn't figure out why he would want that. "But I know he was planning it because he took me out to Patty's Diner the weekend before and told me to eat whatever I wanted, like I was never going to eat again."

We sat in silence for a few moments before I decided to finish explaining.

"This is where it comes to my mom," I started up again, pulling Mason closer to my side. "She was a stay at home mom. My dad made enough to support us because he owned his own law firm and Jonah was already a dad so my mom stayed at home and watched Miles while Mae and Jonah were at school."

I felt Mason nod against me.

"After my dad died, my mom was hardcore freaking out," I explained. "Like she wasn't all depressed or anything, she tried so hard to be happy, it was obvious how fake it was."

She would pretty much let me do whatever I wanted and that was when Jonah really started to parent me.

"So after all the paperwork was sorted after my dad died and we got the will, it turned out he went bankrupt and we had barely enough money to keep the house for the next few months," I took a deep breath before continuing. "That was when my mom started dealing drugs, to pay for the house."

"She hid it from me and Jonah pretty well, but she got busted after two years and now she's serving a fifteen year sentence for drug dealing," I finished off.

"Fifteen years?" Mason gasped, looking up at me.

I nodded. "It could have been worse. She technically could have gotten life because of the kinds of drugs she was selling and how much of it she had. They wanted to give her twenty-five, but she took a plea deal and got it down to fifteen, but she can get out in twelve and go on parole for the rest of her sentence."

"How long has she been in there now?" Mason asked curiously.

I smiled sadly. "Three years."

Mason smiled sadly back and put his arm around me, hugging me close to him and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

"So that's why you live with Jonah and Mae?" Mason asked after we sat in silence for a few moments.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "Jonah is my guardian. When my mom went to prison, I had to go in the foster care system for a few months while they worked out Jonah's guardianship, but it was okay because Mae's parents fostered me."

"Well at least that kinda worked out," Mason said, looking on the brighter side.

I let out a small laugh. "Yeah, it was actually not too bad. Mae's parents are cool and I got to hang out with Jack a lot. Jonah visited me every day while he worked on becoming my legal guardian and buying the house."

"So, the house you live in now...?" Mason trailed.

I nodded. "It's the house I grew up in."

"How did Jonah afford to buy that so young?" he questioned.

"Mae's dad is a realtor, he hired Jonah, paid for him to get his real estate license, and cosigned on the house," I explained.

"Wow," Mason said as if he was at a loss for words.

My chest felt lighter after explaining everything to Mason. Now that there were no secrets between us, our relationship could only get stronger.

***

Mason Maloney

I was huffing and puffing by the time I rounded the track the fourth time, completing the mile. Ross stood in front of me, looking at the stopwatch on his phone before looking up at me approvingly.

"Your time is better, not good enough, but better," Ross said with a smile on his face.

I let out a sigh, bending over with my hands on my knees. At least I was making progress, but I couldn't wait to never have to run around this track again.

"We should go running again this weekend," Ross suggested, offering me a bottle of water which I gladly took. "Whenever you don't have work."

"I'm off Saturday afternoon," I said after chugging the water Ross had handed me.

"Perfect–"

"Wait, I made plans Saturday afternoon," I told him, remembering I had plans with Sam directly after work. I should have remembered considering we always hung out after work on Saturdays.

Ross gave me a puzzled look. "With who?"

"Sam," I said without thinking. My eyes widened when I realized what had come out of my mouth.

"You guys hang out a lot huh," Ross observed and I could tell he was suspicious of me. "Are you helping him with his baking?"

"Uh, yeah," I stammered, not meeting his eyes. He was onto me and I knew it. Ross wasn't stupid, he knew that wasn't really what we were doing.

"Why don't you guys do that when you're at work?" Ross asked in a questioning tone.

Any normal people would do that while they were at work, but I needed it as a lie so I would have an excuse to hang out with Sam. Ross obviously saw right through me.

"We, uh, we get busy," I said nervously, not noticing the inappropriate connotation my words had until after I said them.

Ross looked at me with his eyes narrowed and his head turned upward, like he didn't believe a word I was saying and he was just waiting for me to confess.

"I don't care if you're friends with him, you know," Ross finally said after staring me down. "I'm not Bella."

I let out an awkward laugh. "Yeah, we're kinda friends I guess."

Ross gave me the perfect cop-out to use and I still found a way to make it awkward. Not to mention, I felt guilty lying to his face just then. Ross was always a good friend to me, he was a never annoying or negative, he didn't deserve to be lied to.

I let out a sigh. "Ross."

He sent me a confused look, glancing up at me from his phone. He seemed to have already forgotten about our conversation, but I sure hadn't. I was guilty, but I also felt like I had to get this off my chest. I had made it a month and half without telling anyone about Sam and me and it was actually beginning to kill me. Christo knew about us, so what was the harm if Ross did? His mouth surely wasn't as big as Christo's.

"What?" he asked after I stared at him in silence for a few moments.

"If I tell you this, you have to swear you won't say anything about it to *anyone* ," I warned with an accusatory finger pointed at him.

Ross still looked confused when he replied. "Okay?"

"I mean it, not Pete, not Bella, *no one* ," I warned again.

"Alright, I swear," Ross said, sliding his phone into his pocket.

As I geared up to tell him the truth, I began to wonder why I even wanted to tell him in the first place. I had been so close to telling him I was gay before and I couldn't do it. What was different now? Coming out to Nathan surely helped my confidence since he was so supportive. I supposed I assumed it would be the same with Ross. Part of me began to doubt myself, but the

stronger part wanted to surge forward and tell Ross exactly what I was thinking.

"I'm gay," I said suddenly, feeling the sting of ripping off a band-aid. Ross looked stunned for a moment before his expression turned more casual.

"Ok–"

"And I'm dating Sam Knight," I let out quickly before he could say anything. I didn't want to get false hope from his support of my sexuality and then be crushed when he voiced his distaste in my relationship. I just wanted to get it all at once.

"Holy shit," Ross said, though he didn't sound shocked at all. "I guess I should have seen that coming."

I stared at him, puzzled. "What?"

"I knew you must've had some type of relationship with him and I saw how uncomfortable you were when Bella had a thing for him," Ross explained. "Back then I thought it was because you didn't really like him, not because *you* had a thing for him, but it makes sense now."

"So, you don't think I'm stupid for dating him?" I asked curiously. Sometimes, I felt stupid for it, but then I remembered how happy I was with him and it didn't matter anymore.

Ross shrugged. "It's risky, but I think it would be more stupid if you let some stupid rivalry keep you from dating who you really want to be with."

I smiled widely at Ross, expressing my gratitude for his support.

"And he seems like a cool guy, obviously he is if you like him," Ross continued, smiling back at me.

I couldn't stop myself from launching toward him and wrapping him in a hug. He laughed before throwing his arms around me after stumbling back a bit.

"Maybe you can hang out with us some time," I suggested as the two of us walked away from the field and toward the parking lot to Ross's car.

He gave me a strange look and shook his head. "And be the third wheel while you two make out? No thanks."

I threw my head back in laughter. "No! One of his friends, Christo, found out and now he won't leave us alone. I figured you could join us."

Ross seemed to ponder on the thought for a moment before nodding. "Sure, why not."

The two of us got in the car and sat in silence for a few moments while Ross let the car warm up. He turned to me, an eyebrow raised with a quizzical look on his face. I raised both of my eyebrows in a questioning glance, wondering why he was looking at me like that.

"How did Christo 'find out' about you two?" Ross asked, seeming as if he already knew the answer. I couldn't help but throw my head back in laughter again before shaking my head at Ross.

"Trust me, you don't want to know."

**

Hi everyone! Sorry for the late update . Something came up and I wasn't able to get to it until now .

What did you think about Sam's confession ? Were you surprised? Also, Ross knows about them now! What do you think about that?

Thanks for reading!

36

Mason Maloney

I sat on the icy cold bleachers with Bella while the two of us waited for Ross and Pete to return with our hot chocolate. Since it was the beginning of December, the nights were exceptionally cold and playoff football had begun. It seemed as though tonight there was an even bigger crowd than usual, so getting seats on the bleachers was a feat of its own. Our town was filled with excitement at the prospect of winning the championship this year, but our team would have to make it through two playoff games for that.

Bella stood up and waved over her three book club friends who she was saving seats for. I had almost forgotten about her friend Wendy who had a thing for me, but I was quickly reminded when she looked at me with flirtatious eyes.

"Thanks for saving us seats, Bell," one of the girls said, moving past me to sit with Bella. The four girls began talking animatedly about Bella's date tomorrow night, discussing what she would wear. I tuned them out and patiently waited for the return of my friends.

I didn't have to wait long before I saw Ross and Pete making their way up the bleacher steps, holding cups of hot chocolate in each hand. Ross sat down next to me and handed me a cup to which I handed to Bella, before he handed me my own.

"The line was outrageous," Pete complained, sipping his drink and quickly retracting his mouth from it.

Ross nodded in agreement. "I didn't think we would make it back in time for kickoff."

Just as he said the words, the game started. I turned to him with raised eyebrows.

"Well, you made good timing," I commented.

Pete reached over Ross to swat at my shoulder, nodding his head and gesturing for me to look to my side.

"Dude, that girl Wendy keeps looking at you," Pete told me excitedly in a hushed tone.

I didn't even have to look to know he was telling me the truth. I couldn't fathom why she had a thing for me, but I knew that she definitely did. She made it obvious.

"Not interested," I muttered, blowing on my hot chocolate before taking a small sip. The liquid burned my tongue as soon as it entered my mouth, but I paid it no mind. At least I would have an excuse to not talk to Wendy if my tongue was burned.

"Why not?" Pete asked. "She's cute."

"Then you talk to her," I replied with an eye roll to which Ross let out a small chuckle.

Pete looked at me with a blank expression for a few moments before shrugging and taking a sip of his drink.

"I just might," he said.

I surely hoped he would. It wasn't that Wendy bothered me, she rarely ever spoke to me. I just figured everyone would be better off if she forgot about her crush on me.

While I stared off into space, everyone around me stood up and cheered as the Warriors scored the first touchdown of the game. I didn't bother standing up since I had already missed it.

By the end of the game, the Warriors had scored twenty-eight points while the other team was stuck with a measly three. As everyone swarmed the stairs, trying to get out of the bleachers, I felt a hand on my lower back. I turned to see that it was Wendy.

"Sorry," she said in an innocent voice. "There are so many people. I don't want to fall."

I nodded, not really buying that the reason she touched me was to prevent herself from falling. Though I didn't believe her, I didn't say anything as she kept her hand on me and we made our way down the bleachers.

"Are you going to Bella's tonight?" Wendy asked, falling into step beside me as the rest of our friends walked ahead of us.

I sighed, shaking my head. "No, I have other plans," I lied.

She gave me an unreadable expression. "That's a shame."

When I didn't answer her, she took the opportunity to say something else.

"We should hang out more," Wendy told me, moving to stand closer to me so that my arm brushed up against her's. "I'd really like to get to know you better."

I didn't respond, looking to Ross for help, but he was immersed in his phone, most likely talking to Liza. The two of them were supposed to meet up after the game tonight.

Wendy had seemed so shy at first, just staring at me and never really talking to me, but now she had somehow found the courage to spark up a conversation and I was not excited about that.

"Maybe some other time," I said, though I didn't mean it. I had no intention of getting to know any of Bella's friends, especially not Wendy.

Luckily, I made it to mine and Nathan's car within the next few moments. Nathan had given me the keys earlier so that I would be able to get in the car to wait for him. I quickly slid in the car, not bothering to say goodbye to anyone.

Nathan didn't take long to make it to the car. When he got in the driver's seat, he appeared to not even have showered yet.

"You could have showered," I said, a look of disgust on my face.

"I will at home," he said, starting the car after I handed him the keys.

"That doesn't help the smell situation right now," I responded, opening my window.

Nathan smirked and looked at me out of the corner of his eyes.

"It's not *that* bad," Nathan defended himself with a laugh. "You're just dramatic."

"You're used to it because that's what you always smell like," I explained. "It's gross."

Without warning, Nathan grabbed my head and put me in a headlock with his right arm as he drove out of the school parking lot. All I could smell was his disgusting sweat as I struggled to break free.

"Nathan!" I screeched, pulling at his arm to try to get him to release me.

"Take it back," was all he said.

"Take back what? The truth?" I asked as I continued to struggle. He was too strong for me to defeat.

Nathan didn't say anything as he continued to keep his hold on me. Eventually I gave up and let myself go limp in his hold, sighing in defeat.

"Fine, you don't smell all the time," I mumbled, pulling my head away from him as soon as he loosened his grip. "But right now, you smell like death."

Nathan went to grab for me again, but this time I made sure I leaned far enough away from him so that I was out of his reach.

Soon enough, we made it to our house and I made sure to get in my room before Nathan could do anything else to me. I sat on my bed, looking toward my door until I heard the shower turn on, signaling I was safe from Nathan's stench.

I pulled my phone out after feeling it vibrate in my pocket. It turned out to be a text from Sam.

Will you need a ride to work tomorrow?

I thought about it for a moment. There was no way that Nathan would be awake by the time I had to go to work, since we were working the morning shift. He wouldn't see Sam come pick me up.

That would be nice

Okay. You still coming to mine after work?

Yesssss

Perfect:)

Sam and I exchanged a few more casual texts before I eventually fell asleep.

***

By the time our shifts were over the next day, I was ready to cuddle up next to my boyfriend and take a nap. The morning shift really tended to take a lot out of me.

When we got to Sam's house, I suggested we go up to his room to lie down and he quickly agreed with me. And so, that was where we were. I rested my head on Sam's chest, wrapping my arm around his waist while his arm was around my shoulders and our legs were intertwined.

"I need to tell you something," I suddenly mumbled against Sam's body, running my finger up and down his chest.

He picked his head up, looking at me with a confused expression. It was cute, the way he looked like he had just woken up with his eyes slightly puffy.

"What?" Sam asked in a husky, raspy voice.

I chuckled, picking my head up. "Were you asleep?"

"I was falling asleep," he answered, clearing his throat. "What did you need to tell me?"

It had slipped my mind that I had forgotten to tell Sam that I told Ross about our relationship. I knew he wouldn't be angry about it, but he deserved to know that someone else knew about us.

"I told Ross about us," I said, placing my palm on his chest.

"You did?" Sam asked, surprised.

I nodded. "I guess I just wanted to tell someone. Keeping a secret like this is exhausting."

Sam chuckled and nodded in agreement. "It is."

We sat in a comfortable silence for a few moments before Sam decided to speak up again.

"I think Christo is coming over later," he said. "Maybe you should invite Ross."

I rolled my eyes playfully. " *Of course* Christo is coming over later."

Sam laughed, his chest vibrating under my head. "I don't know what his problem is lately."

"Maybe something went on with Jake and Owen," I suggested. Christo was hanging around with us so much, it seemed like he wasn't seeing his other friends.

Sam shook his head. "They're fine with each other at school. That can't be it."

"Maybe he just really likes hanging out with me," I joked, looking up at Sam.

"I'm sure that's it," Sam replied with a smile as he looked down to meet my gaze.

The two of us decided on taking a nap after our conversation. It seemed like we were only asleep for a matter of minutes when Christo came barging into Sam's room, ordering us to wake up. In fact, it had been two hours. We were stilled cuddled in the same position, not having moved in our sleep.

"It's, like, two-thirty in the afternoon. Why are you guys asleep?" Christo asked, sitting down on the bed beside me.

"Because we had to be to work for five AM?" Sam suggested sarcastically, his voice raspy and heavy from sleep.

I let my eyes close to rest, but Christo quickly shoved me and my eyes shot open again, sending him a tired glare.

"Wake up, Little Maloney," Christo said, looking down at me. "I'm bored. You guys need to pay attention to me."

"You're so high maintenance," I groaned, sitting up slightly and leaning over Christo to grab my phone from the nightstand.

"Are you going to invite Ross?" Sam asked, pulling me closer to him and resting his head on my shoulder.

"Ross?" Christo asked confusedly, tilting his head to the side.

"He's my friend," I answered him, scrolling through my phone to send Ross a text message.

"Why would he come here?" Christo asked, sounding just as confused as before.

Sam let out a sigh. "Mason told him about us."

Christo looked slightly disappointed and annoyed at the news Sam shared with him. He sent me a subtle glare.

"So I'm not the only one that knows anymore?" Christo said with annoyance lacing his tone.

I rolled my eyes. He was as dramatic as Bella. Maybe the two of them would make a good couple.

"Get over it," Sam said sternly.

I quickly sent a text to Ross, inviting him over to Sam's house and sending him my location.

If you're not doing anything, you should come to Sam's.

sure

His reply was short, exactly what I would expect from Ross. He always seemed to be on his phone, but he never wasted too much time texting. Every text he sent was always straight and to the point. Unless he was talking to Liza, I supposed.

"He's coming," I announced, removing myself from Sam's grip to stand from the bed.

"The whole town is gonna know about you two if you don't keep your mouth shut!" Christo exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air.

"I told *one* person," I said, giving Christo a pointed look.

"The only one here who would let the whole town know is your big mouth," Sam told him, getting up to stand beside me.

Sam placed his hand on my lower back and led me out of his room, bringing the two of us downstairs. Christo followed soon after, mumbling under his breath. Sam and I sat down on the couch, Sam throwing his arm around my shoulders and me leaning into his side with my head on his chest. Christo snatched the remote off of the coffee table before Sam could and turned the TV on, switching to a movie channel.

"What the hell is this?" Sam asked in a grumpy tone to which I pinched his side for. He winced slightly, but I assumed he got the hint.

"You've never seen *Miss Congeniality* ?" Christo questioned with a shocked expression, raising his eyebrows in disbelief.

Sam and I both shook our heads, Christo giving us a gaping expression.

"What kind of gays are you?" he mumbled, shaking his head and looking toward the TV.

I looked up at Sam the same time he gazed down at me. The two of us gave each other strange looks as if asking: "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

We didn't say anything as Christo looked straight ahead at the movie, seemingly ignoring us. Sam didn't seem to be paying attention to the movie as he scrolled on his phone. Eventually he brought the phone in front of my face, snapping a picture of me.

"What the hell?" I whispered, looking up at my smirking boyfriend.

"I took a picture of you," was his reply.

"Yeah, I got that," I answered with a light chuckle. "Why?"

Sam shrugged. "I always take pictures of you."

I sat up and raised my brow. "You do?"

Sam nodded.

"How come I haven't noticed?" I wondered.

"Maybe because you're oblivious?" Sam teased, a smirk covering his face. "I take them when you look happy."

My heart swelled at his words. If it were anyone else, I would have found this gesture creepy, but this was Sam, *my* Sam.

Sam reached his phone out in front of us and snapped a quick picture of the both of us, while I was still looking at him. When he showed me the picture, I realized I was looking at him with a wide smile and a blush on my cheeks. My gaze was intent on him, looking at him like he was the light of my life.

"See?" Sam said, his smirk turning into a smile of his own.

I bit my bottom lip, my upper lip turning up as I tried to hide my smile. In a quick motion, I leaned up to give my boyfriend a kiss on the cheek. He was quicker than I was and snapped another picture.

"Sam!" I laughed.

"You look cute," he said, staring down at the picture he took.

For the next few minutes, the two of us sat there taking selfies on Sam's phone instead of watching the movie with Christo. Christo didn't seem to mind as he was too invested in the movie to care about what we were doing.

After a little while, there was a knock on the door. I sprung up from my seat on the couch, out of Sam's arms, to get to the front door. I scurried out of the living room and down the hall to meet Ross as I swung open the door quickly.

He looked casual and not nearly as nervous as I felt. I knew he said that he thought Sam was a cool guy, but he had only hung out with him once. If I was going to be with Sam for a while, then I needed my friends to like him, especially Ross. Out of my three closest friends, his opinion mattered to me the most.

"Hey man," Ross greeted me with a casual smile, stepping into the house. "So this is where you're always hanging out?"

I let out an awkward chuckle, scratching the back of my neck. "Yeah. Here and the bakery."

I led Ross to the living room where I left Christo and Sam, the two of them not being in the same positions as before. Instead of sitting on opposite

sides of the couch, Christo was on top of Sam as he tried stealing the remote control from his grasp. The channels on the TV were rapidly changing as the two of them pressed down on the buttons in their tug of war.

I left an amused Ross standing in the doorway of the living room, stomping over to the idiotic boys on the couch. I smacked Christo hard on the shoulder, causing him to yelp. This distraction gave Sam the chance to knock him on the floor.

"That's not fair!" Christo exclaimed, lying on his back and looking up at me with an angry expression.

"Get over it," Sam said, changing the channel to ESPN and motioning for me to sit down beside him. I nodded my head over to Ross, causing Sam to look over at him.

"Oh hey, Ross," Sam greeted, motioning for him to come over to the couch. "Don't mind Christo, he's just a sore loser."

Ross chuckled, making his way over to the couch. I sat down beside Sam while Ross sat on my other side and Christo stayed on the floor, being dramatic as usual.

It didn't take long for Sam and Ross to fall into casual conversation. Sam seemed to be able to charm everyone he met, and Ross was no exception. I was grateful for that. I didn't know what I would do if Ross ended up hating him, he was the one person I expected to be on mine and Sam's side.

While the two of them spoke, Sam absentmindedly snaked his arm around my waist, pulling me closer to him. I saw Ross bite back a close-lipped smile, obviously noticing the gesture that Sam didn't even seem to notice himself.

**

Hello everyone thanks for reading!

I just want to remind everyone that my update days are typically Wednesday and Friday (sometimes earlier/later but always twice a week) because I've been getting a lot of questions about it lately. I've had the last few Tuesdays (and I think next Tuesday) off from work so that's why I've had the chance to update earlier.

I also want to apologize to anyone who sent me a private message and I haven't replied. I get quite a few of them, but I always forget to check them too so sorry if I haven't gotten back to you.

LAST THING: Some of you wanted me to make the playlists that Mason and Sam made for each other and as of right now I have Mason's done and published on a separate book on my profile and Sam's will be done soon. If you're interested please check it out.

Please let me know what you thought of the chapter! What did you think of Sam, Mason, Ross and Christo hanging out?

37

Mason Maloney

"So I walked in on them about to have–"

"Okay, Christo," Sam interrupted him with a stern expression. "Enough."

Ross threw his head back in laughter at Christo's story, sending me an amused glance.

"I'm sure Ross wants to know," Christo replied with raised eyebrows, looking toward Ross for confirmation.

"No, I'm good," Ross chuckled, lightly shaking his head.

Christo sighed, shaking his head. "I don't know if he's cut out to be in our group."

"Our group?" I asked him with an incredulous stare.

"Are there requirements or something?" Ross laughed.

"No, he's just dramatic, but I'm sure you figured that one out already," Sam replied.

"Rude," Christo muttered.

"He's not the most dramatic person in my life, believe me," Ross assured him.

"Thank you, Ross!" Christo exclaimed, springing up from his seat on the floor to sit beside Ross on the couch. "You can be my new best friend instead of Sam."

"That's fine with me," Sam told him, slinging his arm around my shoulder as he changed the channel on the TV.

"You're not stealing my best friend," I told Christo with an eye roll.

He scowled at me, leaning over Ross to get closer to my face.

"Why not?" Christo asked. "You stole mine."

"No need to fight over me," Ross interjected with an arrogant smirk, pushing Christo lightly to sit him back down.

Ross and I left Sam's house around ten. Sam was a little disappointed that I wasn't going to be staying at his house for the night, but he had gotten a call from some of his other friends that wanted to hang out with him and Christo.

"You and Sam seem good together," Ross told me as he pulled away from the house.

"You think so?" I asked with a bashful smile. I felt so feminine for being so giddy about Sam, but I couldn't help it. He really brought that out in me like no one else had before.

Ross's mouth quirked up on one side in a slight smile, turning to look at me briefly before putting his eyes back on the road.

"Yeah," Ross agreed. "You guys seem really into each other. Well, not like *into–* "

I let out a loud laugh, throwing my head back on the headrest, at Ross's accidental innuendo. When I looked over at him, we shared a look of amusement at his words.

"I can assure you, we're both," I said jokingly, though it wasn't actually a joke. It was *true* .

Ross's face contorted into a brief look of faux disgust before turning back to a look of amusement.

"So you guys, like, you have... sex?" he asked awkwardly, his lips pressed together in a thin line. I couldn't help but laugh at him again.

"That's what two people, who are dating, do," I responded sarcastically, rolling my eyes playfully.

"Okay, true," Ross replied. "I guess I just never thought about it."

My face transitioned into a strange look. "I would prefer you *not* to think about my sex life."

Ross cackled, shaking his head. "I definitely don't. That's not what I meant."

"That's what it sounded like," I mumbled with a breathy chuckle, my eyebrows raised in question.

"I just meant I forgot you're two dudes, shit, uh," Ross stammered, "that's not what I mean either, shit."

I couldn't help but be entertained by Ross's rambling. I sat back in my seat, watching the panicked look on his face as he tried to find the right words to say.

"I just mean that I forgot things are different for two guys than a relationship between a guy and a girl," he finally explained.

"Yeah, I get what you mean," I said, nodding in agreement.

"Wait," Ross said with wide eyes as he pulled in front of my house. "That means you *and* Bella had sex with Sam."

I shot him a nasty glare to which he gave me an apologetic look. It definitely wasn't lost on me that one of my best friends had sex with my boyfriend. It was something I tried not to think about because if I did, it would only bother me more.

"I don't think about it and me and Sam don't talk about it," I said sternly.

"Sorry," Ross muttered, giving me a look of false innocence. "We're going running tomorrow."

I sighed. "Fine."

"Don't sound too happy!" he joked as I got out of the car.

I shook my head, a playful smile on my face, before waving to Ross and heading up to my house. I was surprised that the lights were on downstairs, since it was now past ten, and Nathan was home. That should have told me that something was off right away, but I stepped into the house blissfully ignorant to what was going on.

"I can't believe you, Nathan!" I heard my father scream as soon as I walked in the door. His yelling piqued my interest, causing me to follow the sound of his voice into the kitchen where Nathan was sitting at the table in front of our fuming father and upset mother who were standing before him.

My father was waving around a bag that contained a green substance. It took me a moment to realize what it was. *Shit* .

"Bringing drugs into this house?" Dad seethed. "What is the matter with you?"

"Dad, I–" Nathan started, but our father cut him off abruptly.

"I have half a mind to take you off the football team!" he screamed.

Nathan's eyes widened, his face paling, and I felt mine do the same. Part of me thought Dad was just bluffing. He wouldn't actually keep Nathan from playing, would he? The look in his eyes told me that he was dead serious and I couldn't let that happen to Nathan. I wouldn't let it happen.

"Dad, it's mine," I spoke up, causing everyone's eyes to turn to me.

I saw Nathan shake his head at me, a look of shock on his face, out of the corner of my eye, but I kept my gaze settled on our father, whose face was red in anger. He looked at me in confusion as if he couldn't believe that it would be mine. He would be right, but I wasn't going to let him know that.

It wasn't the first time I had taken the blame for Nathan. I used to do it all the time when we were kids because he got in trouble so often, me taking the blame every once in a while would soften the blow. It didn't take me long to figure that out when we were younger. Besides, he was there for me when I needed him, and I would do the same for him. Especially since he had a lot more to lose than I did.

"Mason?" Dad asked, his tone becoming softer. "Why the hell would you bring weed into this house? Don't lie for your brother."

Nathan looked as if he was going to speak up, but I shot him a hard stare. He got my nonverbal message and kept his mouth shut.

"I'm not lying," I assured him, stepping further into the kitchen. "I asked Nathan to hide it for me, but it's not his. It's mine."

"Mason, why would you do this?" my mother spoke up for the first time, crossing her arms over her chest.

I knew the only way to get less of a punishment for this was to make them feel bad for me. It was a shitty thing to do, but I knew they would be lenient with me if they felt sympathy. It was harder for them to be lenient with Nathan because he was always doing things he shouldn't, but I wasn't. I hated lying to my parents, but I would do it for Nathan. But if I was going to do it, I was going to get a lax punishment, but that's beside the point.

"I've just been feeling stressed lately and I thought it would help," I lied, trying to act like I was ashamed of myself. "I only did it a few times."

"And did it help?" Dad asked pointedly, lifting the bag in the air again.

I shook my head. "Not really. It did for a little bit, but it didn't make it any better."

"Mason," Mom said in a soft tone. "Why didn't you just talk to us if you were stressed? We could have helped you."

"I wish you would have come to us," Dad agreed, "instead of turning to drugs. Really Mason? What were you thinking?"

I shrugged. "I guess I wasn't."

I knew how to play my parents and they seemed to be buying into my lie. My father looked less angry than he did before while my mother looked just as concerned.

"Are you being bullied at school?" Dad asked suddenly. "Is that why you're stressed?"

"What? No–"

"Is it those guys that beat you up before?" Dad cut me off, getting angrier as he spoke. "I knew we should have pressed charges."

"Dad, I'm not being bullied," I assured him.

"Then what?" he asked in exasperation.

"I'm stressed about school, applying for college, *paying* for college," I began to list.

My father shook his head. " *We* will pay for your college. You don't have to worry about that."

I gave him a knowing look. "You shouldn't have to though. I have money saved, but it's not enough."

"Mason," my mother said softly, coming to stand next to me and placing her hand on my shoulder. "You don't have to worry about any of that. We can help you look for schools and *we will* pay for it."

"We need to start being more open in this family," Dad cut in, looking toward Nathan and then back at me. "We don't spend enough time together and we don't talk about things. That's why this happens."

He motioned for us to all sit at the table with Nathan. I sat beside my brother with my mother across from me and my father across from Nathan. We were silent for a few moments before Dad continued his point.

"We are going to start spending more time together," Dad asserted, looking at each of us. "We are going to tell each other when something is bothering us."

The three of us nodded in agreement, not adding anything as my father looked as if he wanted to continue.

"Nathan, I'm sorry for accusing you without letting you explain and for threatening to take you off the team. I wouldn't really do that to you," Dad apologized sincerely, looking Nathan in the eye. "But I'm not happy that you hid this for your brother. When something like this happens, you need to come to us."

Nathan nodded. "I know, I'm sorry."

Despite his words, I knew Nathan would never go to my parents about a secret I was keeping and I would do the same for him, unless he was really harming himself. It was an unspoken agreement between us that we would cover for each other no matter what.

"And Mason," Dad started, turning his attention to me. "I'm sorry if you felt like you couldn't talk to us, but it is *not* okay to bring drugs into our house, understand?"

I nodded quickly.

"Mase, I think you and I should look at some college things tomorrow," Mom suggested, reaching across the table to grasp my hand in her's.

"Okay," I agreed. I looked to Dad, knowing he was going to have more to say.

"Mase, you still need to have some type of repercussion for this," he told me, giving me a stern, yet soft look.

"I know," I uttered with a sigh.

"We are going to add onto your chores," Dad started, looking to my mother for confirmation to which she nodded. "And on your days off next week you are going to come straight home from school."

It wasn't an ideal punishment for me, but it was better than what Nathan would have gotten. I knew for a fact that even though Dad said he wouldn't have taken Nathan off of the football team, he would have told his coach about the incident and let him deal with it. Either way, Nathan would have fared far worse than I was going to.

"And we are going to start having mandatory family time," Mom added, smiling at each of us. "At least one night a week we are having a family night."

"I like that idea," Dad said, smiling over at Mom fondly. "And we are going to start being more open and honest with each other."

Nathan and I nodded in agreement, but didn't say anything. I knew that we were both itching to get upstairs and away from our parents.

"Now," Dad said, looking over at Nathan and I. "Does anyone have anything to say that we should know about?"

Nathan's eyes immediately darted to me, causing both of our parents to look at me expectantly. I kicked Nathan's shin under the table to which he let out a hiss in pain.

"There's more, Mason?" Dad questioned curiously.

"No," I said instantly. "There's no more." I tossed a glare in Nathan's direction to which he sent me an apologetic look.

"Stop using your twin telepathy right now," Mom warned, pointing a finger at us.

"We're not," we said at the same time, giving each other a glare after the words came out.

Our parents looked at us like they knew we were lying, but decided to let it go. Dad looked up at the clock behind us on the wall and let out a yawn.

"It's late, we can continue this some other time," he said. That was all he had to say for Nathan and I to stand up from our seats and scurry up the steps.

Nathan was ahead of me so I smacked him hard on the back, causing him to let out a groan and turn around to give me a glare that matched my own.

"You were just going to fucking out me to our parents?" I hissed in a whisper. "After what I just did for you?"

Nathan put his finger to his lips, signaling for me to be quiet. When we reached the top of the steps, Nathan motioned for me to follow him into his room to which I obliged.

His room was nearly identical to mine, having the same light gray walls and white outlines, only his was messier. He had football equipment piled up next to his desk and the desk was cluttered with papers and books. His bed was never made and his hamper was overflowing. Needless to say, he wasn't the clean one out of the two of us.

"I didn't ask you to do that," Nathan said once we were both in his room with the door shut.

"A 'thank you' would do," I said sarcastically, crossing my arms over my chest with my eyebrows raised.

Nathan rolled his eyes and mimicked my stance. "Thank you, and I didn't mean to make it obvious you were hiding something. It was just a reflex."

"You need to work on your poker-face," I told him seriously.

Nathan nodded, leaning back against his bureau. I looked behind his shoulder and noticed, beside all the mess he had, was a picture of the two of us from our sixteenth birthday. It was the afternoon of our birthday and our parents let us skip school so that we could go take our permit test. When we

both passed the test, they took us out for lunch and the picture was of the two of us smiling widely at the camera with our meals in front of us, Nathan's arm slung around my shoulders.

I smiled as I looked at the picture, reminiscing about that day. It reminded me about why I did what I just did for Nathan. It was because the two of us had been there for each other for our entire lives and would be for the rest of them.

"It's whatever," I said, turning my gaze back to my brother. "I'm going to have to tell them eventually anyway."

"Probably sooner than you hoped since they're making us tell them stuff now," Nathan pointed out.

I shrugged.

"They're not going to care anyway," Nathan assured me. "They'll be fine with it."

"I know," I agreed. "I'm more worried about them wanting to meet my boyfriend."

Nathan let out a loud laugh, throwing his head back. "Yeah, that'll be something."

"Dad's going to treat me like a girl," I muttered, a little humor in my tone.

Nathan chuckled, nodding in agreement. "That he will."

With that, I said goodnight to my brother and headed back to my own room, falling asleep feeling an inexplicable happiness in my chest.

**

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading.

So Nathan's little weed problem came back to bite him What did you think about Mason taking the blame for Nathan? Do you think it was

stupid of him?

I want to let everyone know that I have finished my outline for the book and I'm looking at probably ten more chapters after this one plus an epilogue. I have begun planning a new book that I'm excited about and I'll post more info about it when I'm done with Knight :)

Also, I don't want to be mean, but PLEASE do not promote your stories on other people's books. It's alright if you talk about other books in the comments but to promote your book on another book is rude and I will delete your comment. Please don't do it :/

Thank you!

38

Mason Maloney

There was a reason I never talked to my mother about college, and I couldn't pinpoint that reason until she sat me down at the kitchen table with a laptop in front of me while the two of us looked online at various schools. When I suggested looking at some out-of-state schools, the waterworks started.

"Both of my boys want to leave me," she cried, wiping her tears with her thumbs.

"Mom," I groaned, throwing my head back in annoyance. "I'm just giving myself some options."

"Nathan wants to go play football at LSU, you want to go to Florida, my babies are going to be gone!" Mom exclaimed as more tears fell from her eyes.

I sat beside her and awkwardly put my hand on her back, trying to comfort her. My efforts were in vain though, because she didn't stop crying. A few moments later Dad walked in the kitchen and stopped short when he saw Mom crying.

"What did you do to your mother?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

"I told her I wanted to look at schools in Florida," I replied, causing my father to shoot me an understanding look.

Before my father could say anything more, Nathan sauntered into the kitchen, looking like he was just returning from a run. Without paying us any mind, he walked over to the fridge and pulled out a water bottle, downing the entire thing within a few seconds.

"Nathan," Mom sniffled, causing him to gaze over to her with a worried look. "Will you look at some schools with Mase and me?"

Dad took that as his cue to abandon the kitchen, leaving his two sons alone with our emotional mother.

"Uh, sure," Nathan answered, coming over to the table and sitting beside me. "But I already applied."

"I know, I know," Mom said, seeming to have calmed down a bit. "But there's still time to apply to more. Closer ones."

Nathan sighed but didn't say anything, nodding his head in agreement. I knew that Nathan had no intention of staying in Massachusetts for school unless Boston College was the only one to offer him a spot on the football team.

"Maybe you could play football at UConn," Mom suggested, her face lighting up.

Nathan shook his head. "They already have a quarterback for next season. I wouldn't be able to play."

Mom looked discouraged at his words, but she tried not to let it show. Instead, she put a smile on her face and pulled the laptop in front of her to read about the school I had put on the screen: UCF.

Nathan grimaced at the image on the screen as if he knew that was where Sam was headed in the fall. I wouldn't be surprised if he did know that. Nathan liked keeping tabs on his competition.

"Out of all the schools in Florida, you want to go there?" Nathan asked harshly.

Mom shot him a glare. "Don't be rude."

"What's wrong with UCF?" I played dumb. I wanted him to admit the reason why he didn't want me going there. Not to mention, I couldn't let

him know that I knew Sam wanted to go there. That would be too suspicious.

"It's in central Florida, there's nothing to do," he argued weakly.

I rolled my eyes. "It's literally in Orlando. There's plenty to do."

I knew by the look on his face that Nathan wasn't going to say anything about Sam. His jaw was set tightly as he glared at the computer screen, drumming his fingers on the table.

I looked at the time on the computer and noticed it was almost noon time and that I had promised Ross I would go for a run with him.

"Can we do this later? I have to go meet up with Ross," I said to my mother, looking over at her.

She gave me a stern look. "Mase, you're not supposed be going out. It's part of your punishment in case you forgot."

I nearly groaned at her words. "But it's for school. He's helping me get my mile time up so I don't fail gym."

Mom looked conflicted as she thought about what I said. My mother was a bit of a pushover and she hated having to punish Nathan and me. Taking advantage of that was cruel of me, but I *needed* to get out of this house.

"Fine," she finally said. "But you better be back here no later than two o'clock to get your chores done."

"Thank you, love you," I said, standing up from my chair and squeezing my mother in a hug.

I scurried up the steps, texting Ross to come get me, before entering my room. I put on some sweatpants and a t-shirt before grabbing my running shoes and putting them on my feet. It didn't take long for Ross to arrive and soon enough I was out the door and in his car.

"You seem eager to leave your house," Ross commented, his eyebrows raised.

"Trust me, I am," I replied, relief prevalent on my face.

"What happened?" he asked.

"My parents found Nathan's weed and I took the blame for him," I explained, causing Ross's eyes to shoot open wide.

"What the fuck! Why would you do that?" he asked incredulously.

"My dad threatened to take Nathan off the football team," I told him. "Later he said he wouldn't actually, but he definitely would have told his coach and that wouldn't be pretty."

"What's your punishment?" Ross asked. "They're actually letting you out of the house?"

"Technically I'm not supposed to," I said with a sheepish smile.

"But you played your poor mother," Ross filled in the blank of my statement with a disapproving look.

"I have to be back at two!" I exclaimed.

Before Ross could reply, my phone started ringing. I pulled it out of my pocket to see that my boyfriend was calling and instantly answered.

"Hey, handsome," I answered, causing Sam to let out a chuckle.

"Hi. What's up?" Sam replied. "You didn't text me this morning."

"I kinda had a crazy night after I left your house," I told him, leaning my head on the window.

"What happened?" Sam asked, worry filling his tone.

I looked to Ross to see him mouth "invite him" to which I nodded.

"I'm going to Ross's to run with him," I said. "Why don't you come and I'll tell you about it?"

"Send me the address," Sam said. We exchanged a few last words before hanging up. I made sure to send him the address as soon as we got off the phone and a few minutes later, Ross and I were at the house waiting for him.

It didn't take Sam long to show up at Ross's. I watched from the window as Sam parked out on the street and got out of his car, wearing a dry-fit t-shirt along with sweatpants and his running shoes. Ross and I met him outside and motioned for him to follow us into the back yard.

"Hey," Sam said, greeting Ross, before coming over to me and placing his hand on my hip and touching his lips to my forehead in a brief kiss.

"Sup, man?" Ross asked, holding out his fist for Sam to bump.

The two of them exchanged pleasantries while the three of us walked toward the path behind Ross's house. Sam snaked his arm around me as he and my friend spoke.

"Think you can keep up, Mase?" Sam asked me with a teasing gleam in his eye as we got ready for our run.

"No," I said seriously. "So you better go slow for me."

Sam gave me a strange look before exchanging a glance with Ross, causing the two of them to chuckle. I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest in faux annoyance. I was honestly so relieved the two of them were getting along, that it didn't matter to me that they were laughing at my expense.

Sam briefly touched my chin with his fingers, giving me a flirtatious wink.

"You guys ready?" Ross asked, watching our interaction with an amused expression.

We started off with a light jog, Ross going ahead of us while Sam stayed next to me. We were silent for a few moments, but as I looked at Sam, I

could tell that he was ready to start moving faster. He wasn't an athlete for no reason, he didn't need to be doing an easy jog like I did.

"You don't have to go slow for me if you don't want to," I said, though I didn't really mean it. I wanted him to stay with me.

"I want to," he assured me with a charming smile. I smiled back, not even trying to hide my appreciation.

"So," Sam started after we picked up the speed slightly. "What happened last night?"

The previous night ran through my head as he asked the question. It was obvious to me that Sam wouldn't like what I had to say. He already didn't like my brother at all, he wouldn't be too happy to hear that I took the fall for him.

"I got in trouble with my parents," I answered.

"How?"

I ran through the explanation of what happened last night and I feel the annoyance radiating off of Sam beside me. He shook his head, letting out a sigh and setting his jaw tight. Just by that, I could tell he wasn't pleased.

"What?" I dared to ask, though I knew how he felt.

"Your idiot brother just takes advantage of you," Sam said venomously, not bothering to hide his hostility as his eyebrows knitted together disapprovingly.

My face contorted into a look of confusion. "How?"

"And you don't even know it," Sam commented, looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

"How?" I asked again, more sternly this time.

"First of all, he doesn't let you drive *your own car* , second, he leaves you stranded all the time and continues to do it because he never has to face any consequences for it because you don't want to get him in trouble," Sam explained, speeding up his jog.

I sped up, trying to match his speed.

"And third," Sam continued, "he let you take the fall for his stupid actions. He should have just owned up and taken responsibility like a man."

I rolled my eyes, feeling my breath starting to become heavy. "He doesn't take advantage of me. You just want him to take responsibility so he wouldn't be able to play football."

Sam stopped short, causing me to bump into his back. He turned around to face me with an icy glare.

"That is not true," he said in a low tone, looking at me through hooded eyes. "I don't need your brother to be out of the game to beat him."

I was taken aback by his statement and began to back peddle on my previous words.

"I know that, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that," I said sincerely, sending the apology through my eyes.

Sam's expression softened. "I know."

We were quiet for a few moments, just staring into each other's eyes. Sam was right about Nathan taking advantage of me, but I was at fault too because I let him do it. The worst part was, I didn't even mind being taken advantage of by him. If it was anyone else I would, but since it was Nathan, I let it slide. I cared for him more than I cared for myself and I wanted what was best for him.

"I just don't want you to get taken advantage of by anyone," Sam told me softly, stepping closer to me and placing a hand on my cheek. "Especially not by him."

His words were comforting and sincere, but the way he looked made his words have much more power. I didn't think I had ever seen him look so genuine and caring. He looked at me like I was the most important thing to him, like I was his light in the dark night sky, like I was in focus while everything else around us was a blur, like I was his *home* . It was a look of, dare I say, love.

The reason I recognized that look, why it looked so familiar yet so foreign, was because I knew that was exactly how I looked at him. He made me feel comfortable and safe in a situation where I should feel anything but. He made me feel wanted and secure in a way that I had never felt before. The way he looked at me reinforced the idea that though everyone around us would think the two of us being together was wrong, it was actually *so right* .

The odds were against us, but I believed that we could make it through. All with just one look.

My heart clenched and my body tingled from my fingers to my toes as I looked back at him, with what I hoped was a mirroring expression. Looking into his eyes, I realized just what the extent of my feelings for Sam were.

I was irreversibly, undeniably, utterly in love with Sam Knight.

Knowing I couldn't say the words, I did what I hoped would get the message across; I kissed him. I grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him close to me, and kissed him passionately. His lips reacted to mine instantly and his hands fell to my hips while mine stayed gripping his shirt. I poured all of the emotions I felt into this kiss. The frustration at our slight argument, the nervousness of being together in secret, the excitement of being looked at by Sam in such a loving way, and the love I had recently found out about were all being thrust to Sam through our kiss. I didn't know if he felt it, but I sure hoped he did.

"Hey!" Ross yelled, causing the two of us to break apart, though we didn't release each other. The two of us were breathless as we turned to face my friend. I smirked inwardly at myself. Running couldn't make Sam breathless, but *I* could.

"You can make out *after* we finish this mile!" Ross exclaimed with his hands on his hips. "Let's go, lovebirds!"

Sam chuckled, shaking his head playfully at my friend, before looking back to me.

"Let's go," he said with his perfect smile. "Although making out is a great exercise, it's not going to help with your mile time."

I gave him an amused look and smacked his shoulder playfully before taking off in a jog toward Ross. Sam quickly caught up to me, landing a hard slap on my ass, before taking off faster than I could run.

I let out a content sigh and watched him as he went, admittedly staring at his glorious back side in his fitted sweatpants.

The love I felt for him threatened to overwhelm me, but I tried not to let it. Although I felt as though Sam's feelings were similar to mine, I was still too afraid to tell him how I felt. The realization was still too knew for me to voice it out loud. When the time was right, when the two of us weren't a secret, then I would tell him.

I let out another content sigh with a smile on my face before picking up my speed to chase after my quick boyfriend and best friend, who were no longer in sight. I let my thoughts swirl in my head and I that moment I felt bliss.

I was *so* in love with Sam Knight.

**

Hello everyone! Thank you for reading.

What did you think of the chapter? What did you think about Sam and Mason's slight argument? What about Mason's realization about his feelings for Sam?

39

Mason Maloney

I sat in front of Sam, in between his legs and leaning back on his chest, as he and Ross played Madden together. Christo was lying on his stomach across the foot of Ross's bed, intently watching the screen.

After our run, we decided to invite Christo over and hang around for a bit before I had to go home. When Ross suggested Madden, Sam was quick to agree. And so, the four of us sat on Ross's bed while the two of them played the game and I was bored out of my mind. It didn't bother me too much though. Just being with Sam was enough for me.

"Shit!" Ross exclaimed, throwing his controller down on the bed. "How are you so good at this?" he asked, looking at Sam with an incredulous expression.

I felt Sam's chest vibrate as he let out a chuckle at Ross's words, placing his controller down on my leg.

"Lots of practice," Sam joked, amusement evident in his tone.

"Didn't you know that's Sam's dream? To be a pro Madden player?" I asked sarcastically, looking over at my friend's look of defeat.

Ross shook his head at me. "Let's play something else. Preferably something I can smoke you in."

"Someone's a sore loser," I commented jokingly.

"I'll admit it, I am," Ross replied to which Sam laughed again.

"Let me play!" Christo exclaimed, sending a wide eyed look toward Ross. "You could probably beat me."

"He could definitely beat you," Sam countered causing Christo to punch him in the leg.

"Then I'll definitely let him play," Ross responded with a smirk, taking the controller off of my leg and handing it to Christo.

I looked at the time to see that it was almost two o'clock. I could just stay, as I was sure my mother wouldn't *make* me go home, but I felt bad enough for playing her so I decided it was best for me just to obey her.

"I have to go home," I announced, causing the boys to look at me.

"You can walk so Ross and I can play more games, right?" Sam asked, trying to sound serious but failing.

I rolled my eyes. "Are you leaving me for Ross?" I questioned, looking up at him.

Sam looked as if he was thinking about my question before answering with a joking glint in his eye.

"I'm thinking about it," Sam replied, not able to hold back his laughter.

"Stop," Christo warmed. "Ross is my friend now."

"Right," Ross agreed with a chuckle.

I gave my boyfriend a faux annoyed look as I stood up from the bed to put my shoes on. Sam followed me a few moments later along with Christo and Ross after pausing their game.

The four of us walked outside to the cars, Ross hopping in his own while I stood beside it with Sam in front of me as I leaned back on the car. Sam smiled down at me, the sun shining and making his skin glow from behind him, before leaning in the give me a slow kiss.

"Gross," Christo rudely commented, causing Sam to flip him off while not pulling away from me.

"I'll see you at work tomorrow," Sam said, pulling away slightly, his face still close to mine.

"See you," I replied, my mouth quirking up into a grin.

"Christo!" Ross yelled out of the window, grabbing his attention. "Why don't you just wait for me so I can smoke you in Madden when I get back?"

Christo nodded in agreement, getting into his car after saying he was going to grab some lunch while he waited.

Sam walked off to his car and I watched him go as I got into the passenger's seat of Ross's. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ross give me a smug look. I turned to face him, my expression turning into one of confusion.

"What's that look for?" I asked him incredulously.

"You love him," Ross said in a serious tone.

My breath hitched. "What?"

"You love him," Ross repeated. "I could tell by how you were acting today, the way you look at him. It's obvious."

I stayed silent for a few moments, trying to gather my thoughts. If I was that transparent to Ross, then God knows how transparent I was to Sam.

"I guess," I finally replied. "I don't know."

"So you haven't told him?" Ross asked quizzically.

"No!" I exclaimed quickly. "I can't tell him yet!"

Ross gave me a strange look, raising an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Don't you think it's too soon?" I voiced my fear. The two of us had only been dating for a month and a half and I wasn't sure if Sam's feelings had developed as quickly as mine did. He probably wasn't even thinking about love yet.

Ross shrugged. "I have no idea."

We didn't continue the conversation after that and I was grateful for that. Soon enough, Ross dropped me off at home where my mother and Nathan were sitting together in the living room, watching TV.

"Mase! You're home!" my mother exclaimed in a greeting, standing up from the couch with a piece of paper in hand. "Here are your chores."

I eyed the paper as I grabbed it from her.

"Thanks," I said sarcastically, bringing my eyes to my mother who looked at me sympathetically.

"I know it stinks," she consoled me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "But just get it done. It's not too bad."

I nodded and headed toward the kitchen to get a drink of water before I had to start my chores. I had to do chores in the kitchen anyway, so I decided just to start in there. After finishing my water and putting the glass in the dishwasher, Nathan walked in and held his hand out to me.

"What?" I asked him with a strange look on my face.

He rolled his eyes. "The list. Give me half."

I gladly tore the paper at the half-way mark, making sure to give Nathan the half that I *really* didn't want to do. The least he could do was do the chores I didn't want considering I took the fall for him.

"You can't let Mom and Dad see you helping me," I told him sternly, leaning back against the counter.

"Mom's going shopping and Dad's out," Nathan replied blandly, staring down at the paper and reading his list. "You gave me the shit half," he pointed out, looking up at me.

I smirked. "Really? I had no idea," I said, faking innocence.

I stuck Nathan with the bathroom and laundry chores. I had more to do, but his were time consuming so it evened out. The bathroom chores were the least appealing of the bunch, I would much rather clean the kitchen and living area than have to deal with the toilet.

Nathan just scoffed and headed out of the kitchen to start his half, leaving me to start my own.

***

Bella picked me up from work on Monday night, being sure to keep her head down when Sam walked by her car. I told my parents that the two of us would be working on college stuff, which wasn't a lie, so they allowed her to come over.

After eating dinner and showering, I sat down on my bed beside Bella who was staring intently at her laptop. I looked to see what she was doing to see that she was on the UCF website.

"You're interested in UCF?" I asked her curiously.

She sighed. "That's where I'm going," she admitted.

"What?" I asked, my eyebrows shooting upward. "When did you decide on that?"

Bella had never even mentioned that school to me when we were looking at schools together earlier in the year. I had no idea it was even on her radar and now, all of a sudden, she had already committed to going there.

Bella bit her lip, looking embarrassed. "Back when I was obsessed with Sam Knight, I found out the football team was looking at recruiting him so I applied Early Decision and got accepted."

Her confession caused an upset feeling in my stomach. My throat dried as I wracked my brain for the words to say, but the truth was, I couldn't say what I *really* wanted to say to her.

"Bella, what the hell?" I asked exasperatedly. "Why would you do that? Do you even want to go to that school?"

She shrugged. "I do want to go. I didn't just apply because of Sam. I like the school and the programs."

Her words relieved my uneasiness slightly. At least she was interested in going there for herself and not because of Sam. It also made me feel better about applying there, making me feel like I wasn't doing it only for Sam.

"I kinda wanted to apply there too," I confessed, causing Bella's face to brighten excitedly. "Nathan doesn't want me to."

"Who cares?" she asked before enthusiastically saying, "Apply! We can go together like we planned!"

I chuckled at her excitement and shook my head playfully.

"I'll apply," I told her to which she screeched in excitement, opening up the Common App website on her computer. "I didn't mean right now!" I said.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked with wide eyes. "The deadline is in a few weeks."

I shrugged. "I'll do it later."

"Mase," Bella groaned.

"I promise, I'll do it later," I assured her, causing her to hesitantly nod and close the website.

"Do you think we could get Ross and Pete to come with us?" she asked with a hint of joking in her tone.

"Maybe," I replied with a grin. "I have no idea what they're looking to do. I'm not even sure Pete has thought about what he's doing after graduation at all."

Bella sighed. "He worries me. He never thinks about anything."

I nodded in agreement, but didn't add anything more. Pete was never one to think too far into the future and it sometimes got him in trouble. One time he procrastinated for so long that he had to do an entire research project in one night and didn't even end up getting a good grade on it. He definitely wasn't one for planning, so I could see why Bella worried for him.

Bella left my house soon after so we could both get to bed.

The next day at school I got a text from Sam that confused me to no end.

Don't be mad at me, but you might need to find a ride to work today.

What??

You'll see :))))

No matter what I said, Sam refused to elaborate, but when I walked out to the parking lot with Nathan at the end of the day it all made sense. Our car, and all of those of the football team, was covered in Knight's purple paint with words written in black paint. The windshield was covered and I had no idea how long it would take for Nathan to get it off.

I groaned, throwing my head back in annoyance. "I'm going to call Ross for a ride."

Nathan didn't say anything. Instead, he had a murderous look on his face before he stormed off toward the field.

Luckily, I was able to catch up with Ross in the parking lot so he could drive me to work. Soon enough, Sam would arrive so I could give him a piece of my mind.

***

Sam walked into the bakery, looking freshly showered. I glared at his stupid, handsome face as he made his way over to me with a grin.

"Hey," he greeted cheerfully as he walked toward the kitchen to get his apron.

"I'm mad at you," I told him when he returned to the front.

"Hey," he trailed, drawing it out in a complaint. "I told you *not* to be mad at me."

"Well, that's too bad," I replied, crossing my arms over my chest. "You have no idea how annoying it was to see the car like that."

Sam chuckled. "I'm sorry," he apologized, not sounding sorry at all.

"Was it Jake's idea again?" I asked, raising my eyebrows at him.

Sam cleared his throat, scratching the back of his neck. "It was mine," he admitted.

I shook my head in annoyance, smacking him lightly on the shoulder. "I hate you," I said.

"Aw, come on," Sam started, walking closer to me. "That's not true."

He didn't know just how untrue that was.

When Sam got close to me, I placed my hand on the center of his chest and pushed him away lightly, looking behind me to make sure there were no customers in the bakery.

"Now I don't know if I'll have a ride later tonight," I complained, giving Sam a serious look.

"I'll give you a ride," he replied, leaning closer to me.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure Nathan will love that."

"I bet he secretly likes me," Sam joked with a handsome smirk on his face.

I scoffed. "I wouldn't be too sure if I were you, especially after today."

"It wasn't *that* bad," Sam responded, leaning against the counter. "I'm sure he'll get us back anyway, so he'll get his revenge."

"Just tell me he'll be able to get that shit off of our car," I pleaded, looking over at Sam with wide eyes.

Sam smiled down at me. "He'll be able to get it off fairly easily, I made sure of it. The other guys might not have it as easy though."

The bakery was fairly busy throughout the rest of the night, leaving Sam and I little time to talk. We both had to be out front for most of the night to take care of customers, so I wasn't able to do any baking like I was hoping.

When we cleaned up the bakery, I played music from my playlist and watched Sam as he bobbed his head to the music while he swept the floor. I chuckled at him, but he didn't notice as he continued mouthing the words silently.

The two of us looked out the window when Nathan pulled into the parking lot, the car void of any purple paint, besides a little spot on the passenger's side that he missed.

"Maybe you should wait to leave until after we are gone," I suggested as Sam put away the broom and the two of us got ready to leave.

"Mase, chill," Sam tried to console me. "It'll be fine, I'm sure he'll just ignore me."

With how angry Nathan looked earlier, I wasn't too sure about that, but I didn't say anything. I knew that Sam wouldn't listen to me and he could handle himself if anything were to happen.

After shutting off the lights and locking up, Sam and I exited the bakery together. I noticed Nathan look up from his phone and shoot daggers with his eyes at Sam. Sam noticed too and looked at my brother with a smug expression.

I kicked the back of his shoe. "Don't egg him on, Sam."

"But it's so fun," he replied with a wide smile, shooting me a wink. I shook my head at him as I made my way to the car and slid into the passenger's

seat.

"He's lucky I don't get out and clock him," Nathan seethed as soon as I got in the car, watching Sam as he made his way to his own car.

"Nate, please don't," I begged, resting my head on the headrest.

"Do you know how long it took to get that paint off?" Nate asked angrily, basically snapping his neck to look at me.

Instead of answering, I just gave him a stern look, hoping he would understand that I did not want him to get out of this car.

"I hate him," Nathan grumbled after I didn't say anything, throwing the car into reverse. "No one on this Earth annoys me more than Sam Knight."

I suppressed a groan at his words and leaned my head on the cool window as Nathan drove the car away from the bakery.

Leave it to me to fall in love with the one person in the world that my brother couldn't stand the sight of.

**

Hello!

Please let me know what you think of the chapter! What's been your favorite part of the story so far?

Eight chapters left! Drama is coming :)

40

Mason Maloney

I didn't want to have to be hanging out with Bella and her friends before the football playoff game on Friday afternoon, but I was. Ross was out on a date with Liza, since he finally got the courage to ask her out, while I was stuck with Pete, Bella, and Bella's friends. Including Wendy, who wouldn't stop looking at me and trying to talk to me.

Every time I looked to Pete for help, he was too preoccupied flirting with another one of Bella's friends, Cami. All of my hopes that Pete would take Wendy off of my hands were lost when he seemed to have all of his attention on his interest in Cami.

"Mason," Wendy interrupted my thoughts, placing her manicured hand on my arm. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I answered quickly and blandly, shifting so her hand slipped from my arm.

All I wanted to do was pull out my phone and text Sam, but he was busy preparing for his own playoff game. If both Sam and Nathan won their games tonight, it would mean that the two of them would face each other in the state championship game for their division, so tonight was a big deal for both of them.

Wendy frowned when I distanced myself from her, but I couldn't find it in me to feel bad. It wasn't like I was leading her on. I had never given her any inclination to think I had reciprocated those feelings for her. After a while, I thought she would get the hint, but unfortunately she still hadn't.

"Do you want some fries?" Wendy asked me timidly, sliding her plate over to offer me some of her food.

"No, thanks," I replied, a forced smile on my lips.

I sent Pete another pleading look, but he was still too focused on Cami to pay attention to me. I cleared my throat and nudged Pete's arm with my elbow to get him to look at me. Pete turned from Cami to give me an annoyed look while I widened my eyes to plead with him to pay attention to me.

"Hey Wendy," Pete said, grabbing Wendy's attention away from me, "What book are you picking next for your book club?"

Wendy's face brightened up immediately and her eyes widened in delight while she animatedly discussed the book she had picked out, seemingly forgetting about me for the moment. Pete's distraction worked while the entire table seemed to be interested in what Wendy had to say about the book club. With everyone's eyes on her, I pulled out my phone to send Sam a quick text.

Good luck tonight, handsome

I was sure he wouldn't be able to get back to me until after the game, but I wanted to show him my support anyway. Playoff football around here was ten times more intense than in season football. The coaches worked their players practically to death to ensure their spot in the championship game. Sam already told me he would have to take next week off from work if his team made it to the championship because his coach would be extending practices everyday.

Excitement filled me as soon as I realized just how close the end of the football season was. In a week, there would be one winner, and Nathan and Sam would no longer be opponents (until college, that is). Once the season was over, I could be out openly dating Sam and I felt as though I couldn't wait any longer. I wouldn't have to hide my relationship from my friends and family and I wouldn't have to deal with getting hit on by Wendy anymore.

Next week really couldn't come any faster for me.

"Mase!" Pete yelled, nudging me hard in the back.

I rubbed the spot he hit. "What?"

"We're heading out, let's go," he told me, motioning his head toward the exit of the diner.

I stood up and followed Pete out the door while the girls followed behind us. I heard Bella talking about some book the girls had read together, but I didn't pay attention as I grabbed Pete's arm to pull him closer to me.

"Please let me ride with you," I whispered desperately.

"I told Cami she could come with me," Pete answered, shaking his head and pulling his arm out of my grasp.

" *Please* ," I pleaded. "I can't be near Wendy."

Pete chuckled and blew out a long breath. "Dude, you need to just tell her to back off if you don't like her like that which, by the way, I don't understand why you don't. She's cute and really into you and it's not like you've been getting any action lately."

I glared at him and set my jaw tightly, "I'm riding with you."

Pete rolled his eyes. "Whatever, bro. I don't get why you're so scared of Wendy."

"I'm not scared of her," I retorted in an offended tone. "I don't want to have to reject her. I want her to just get that I'm not into her."

"We'll meet you guys at the game?" Bella interrupted as we approached the cars. Cami looked as if she didn't know whether she should get in with Bella or Pete. I walked over to Pete's passenger seat, hoping to make the decision easier for her.

"Yeah, see you there," I rushed out, quickly getting into Pete's car.

"Dude!" Pete exclaimed once he was in the car and the door was shut. "You should've gotten in the back so Cami would have come!"

"You can get with her after the game," I told him, leaning back on the headrest.

"I wish Ross was here so you could ride with him," Pete grumbled, starting the car.

"Stop complaining," I replied.

"I just don't get why you can't get with Wendy!" Pete yelled, looking at me briefly as he pulled out of the parking lot. "Just hook up with her or something to satisfy her."

"I don't like her," I told him in an annoyed tone, "and that wouldn't make her leave me alone."

Pete groaned, shaking his head. "She's hot, she's gonna think you're gay or something if you don't make a move on her. No guy in their right mind would be turning her down."

Instead of answering him, I let out a huff and crossed my arms over my chest. Pete was one of the people I was a little worried about finding out I was gay. It wasn't that he was extremely homophobic and would hate me for it, but he would be the one to start acting weird around me.

I reached out and turned up the radio when I heard the beginning of *Somebody To Love* start. If anything at that moment could put me in a good mood, it was that song. It reminded me of Sam and the way he sang incredibly off key in the bakery as he danced around with the broom in his hands, being my favorite version of himself. The version that was carefree, charming, and light on his feet. I was sure I had fallen in love while watching him like that in the bakery before I even knew that was what I was feeling.

The song abruptly stopped when Pete pulled in our school parking lot and almost immediately shut the car off and got out. I rolled my eyes at his actions. He was just being pissy because I got in his way with Cami. I didn't understand why he cared so much. It wasn't like he was going to care about her in a week, he never did with the girls he got involved with.

When we reached the bleachers, I immediately spotted Ross and Liza who had saved seats for us. I rushed over so I could sit on the other side of Ross on the end of the bleachers, ensuring Wendy wouldn't be able to sit next to me. It was pathetic, that much I knew, but I was desperate.

"Hey guys," I greeted as I slid past Ross and Liza, forcing them to slide down so I could sit on the end, beside the railing.

Ross chuckled. "You trying to get away from Wendy?"

He knew me too well.

"And Pete," I replied. "He's mad at me."

"What's wrong with Wendy?" Liza asked confusedly, leaning over Ross to talk to me.

"She likes him and he doesn't like her back," Ross explained to which Liza nodded in understanding.

Ross turned to me and asked, "And why is Pete mad at you?"

I sighed, scratching the back of my neck. "Apparently he's got a thing for Cami now and they were going to ride here together but I made him let me ride with him so I could get away from Wendy."

Both Ross and Liza laughed loudly at what I had told them as the rest of the group made their way to the bleachers. I glanced briefly at Wendy to see that she seemed to be in deep conversation with Cami and not even noticing that I was going to be so far away from her.

"And," I continued in a whisper after the rest of the group greeted Ross and Liza. "He was getting all mad at me for not being into Wendy."

Ross and Liza gave me matching looks of confusion.

"Why?" Ross asked in a low tone.

"He said I'm going to make her *think I'm gay* if I don't show interest in her," I explained with a knowing look.

Ross's expression darkened and he seemed slightly angry at what I had told him, but he didn't let that show to Liza.

"Maybe you should just let her think you're gay so she will leave you alone," Liza joked with a slight grin.

I smirked. "Not a bad idea."

"Don't let Pete try to make you feel bad for not liking her," Ross said seriously, leaning closer to me so no one else would hear. "I wish he wouldn't say shit like that to you. I know he doesn't *know* , but he's still stupid for saying it."

I just shrugged. "It doesn't really matter."

I wasn't really offended by what Pete had said, I was just unsettled because I was thinking about how he would react once he found out what he said was true. He would probably think I had a crush on him at some point which was *absolutely not true* .

The game started soon after and the crowd was riled up as soon as the kickoff happened. Nathan won the coin toss and decided to receive the ball in the second half, like he always did when he won.

The team was quick to stop the other team's offense from scoring and Nathan was jogging out onto the field sooner than expected. This caused our side of the field to cheer loudly. The bleachers were shaking so much that I reached out to hold onto the railing next to me. When Nathan and our offense scored the first touchdown of the game, the cheers were deafening. Everyone on our side was on their feet.

The rest of the game didn't go by as easily for the Warriors. The other team fought back hard, but the Warriors seemed to fight harder. At the end, the score ended up being 35 to 21 in favor of the Warriors. If I thought the bleachers were too shaky before, it was even worse after the game was won.

People jumped from their seats and rushed down onto the field to congratulate the team.

As I walked with my friends out to the parking lot, I whipped out my phone and smiled when I saw I had a text from Sam.

We won :) I think you might be my good luck charm...

Congrats!!! ❤ I think you don't need any luck.

We texted back and forth for a few more minutes before Sam had to go celebrate with his team. I was glad he was going to do that since it seemed like he never had the chance to hang out with them outside of football.

"Need a ride?" Ross asked me, forcing me to look up from my phone. Liza stood beside him, their hands intertwined.

"Nah," I replied. "I'll ride with Bella I guess. I don't want to butt in on your date."

"Don't worry about it!" Liza interjected. "We're just going home anyway. Besides, wouldn't want you to get harassed by Wendy."

Ross laughed, looking down at her briefly before nodding in agreement.

"Seriously, just come with us," he said. "I'll drop you off first."

"Alright," I agreed, following Ross and Liza to the car.

We made small talk on the way to my house and I was quick to jump out when we got there, not wanting to intrude on their date any more than I already had. Mom and Dad were home by the time I got there, both obviously excited about the outcome of the game.

"Oh, Nathan must be so happy," Mom enthused, clapping her hands together as I walked into the living room.

I laughed, shaking my head. "You know him, he won't be happy until he's won the whole thing. And even then, I'm not so sure."

"He's hard on himself," Dad agreed from where he sat on the couch. "But it pays off for him."

"Man, that was an exciting game," Mom cheered with a wide smile. "I don't know if I'll even be able to sleep! My adrenaline is so high, I can't even imagine how Nathan feels."

I was excited for my brother too, but that wasn't going to keep me from sleeping tonight. Soon after I got home, I made my way up the stairs to get ready for bed. I looked at my phone to see that I had another text from Sam.

Wish I could see you tonight :(

A smiled crept up on my face as I read the message. It seemed like anything he said had the ability to put a smile on my face. My expression staying the same, I quickly answered his message.

Have fun with your team, you deserve it.

You're more fun to be with

How about I go over tomorrow?

Hm... yes please

An uncharacteristic giggle escaped my mouth as I read his message. Usually, I would hate myself for that, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

It's a date then

Perfect, miss you

My heart swelled.

I miss you too. I'm heading to bed.

Sweet dreams, Mase ❤

I was sure all of my dreams would be sweet as long as he was involved with them.

**

Okay! So Sam and Nathan will be playing against each other in the championship. Any predictions on who will win? Who do you want to win?

Also, I just want to let everyone know, because I've been getting a lot of questions about it, as of right now there will *not* be a sequel to this book. This could change if I get the inspiration for it, but writing takes a lot out of me so I think if I were to write a sequel it would be hard for me to keep up with an update schedule because I've been writing about these characters for so long I need to write about something different. However, I have drafted some of the last few chapters and they're LONG and I also have plans for about six bonus chapters after this book is done so you guys will be getting some content after it's done so don't worry!

But I WILL have a new bxb book coming out when this one ends and I'm pretty excited about it :) I think that one might only have updates once a week because it's going to come out when I go back to school so it'll be hard to keep up this schedule, but we'll see.

41

Mason Maloney

Sam and I lay breathlessly together on his bed on Saturday afternoon. Having time to be with each other intimately proved to be difficult since we could only be at his house and his family chose random times to go out. When he found out that Jonah and Mae would be taking the kids to see their grandparents today, Sam called me immediately to come over. Sam still seemed to be on a high from his win yesterday, so we may have gone for a few rounds. Anyway, I wasn't complaining.

Sam wrapped his strong arm around my bare shoulders, giving me a long kiss on the cheek before leaning his head on the wall behind his bed. I rested my head on his shoulder, smiling up at him and letting my fingers play with the necklace that rested on his chest.

"So," I started after the thought came to my mind, "Bella is going to UCF."

Sam picked his head up and looked down at me, widening his eyes slightly. He adjusted his position on the bed before answering.

"She is?" he asked in a confused tone.

I nodded and hummed to confirm his words. "She told me the other day."

"I probably won't see much of her," Sam shrugged his shoulders, "They have a huge student body."

"You might have to see some of her," I told him with a small smile.

Sam quirked his head to the side in question. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to apply," I told him, my smile growing wider as a surprised expression took over his face.

"You are?" Sam asked me excitedly, sitting up and staring directly into my eyes.

I nodded to which Sam decided to plant a hard kiss on my mouth that probably lasted longer than he initially intended. He pulled away, while still holding me close, with a wide grin taking over his whole face and reaching his eyes.

"Man, it would be so nice to go to school together," Sam said after a few moments of silence.

I nodded in agreement. "It would."

Sam responded by planting small kisses all over my face, causing me to let out a girly giggle. I couldn't even feel ashamed of the sound that left my mouth because he continued kissing me, fueling my happiness. My face heated up every time his lips pressed against my skin. I was so content with him that I could stay in bed all day with Sam and it wouldn't feel like the day was wasted.

"Stop it," I laughed, pushing him away lightly.

"I just love to kiss you!" he said cheerfully, pressing one last kiss to my forehead before getting up from the bed and retrieving mine and his clothes from the floor.

Sam tossed my clothes beside me on the bed before getting dressed. I stood up from the bed and put my clothes on before following Sam out of his room and down the stairs. His family had been gone for a while so it was only a matter of time before they returned home.

"Are you staying for dinner tonight?" Sam asked as I followed him into the kitchen. "Mae wanted me to invite you."

"Mae wanted you to invite me?" I teased, remembering the conversation we had when he invited me over for Thanksgiving.

Sam rolled his eyes. "Yes, she wants you over tonight. You know I do too."

"I was just messing with you," I told him lightly, sending him a wink as I leaned against the counter while he opened the fridge and pulled out two water bottles, sliding one across the counter to me.

Out of nowhere, an excited Lila came barreling into the kitchen and threw herself at my legs. The force caused me to stumble as she kept a tight grip on me. For a six year old, she was quite strong.

"Masey!" Lila exclaimed happily, looking up at me with her big blue eyes.

I chuckled, placing my arm around her in a hug. "Hi, Lila."

"No love for me?" Sam pouted, crossing his arms, "I see how it is."

This caused Lila to leave me and throw herself at Sam. He easily lifted her up as she jumped into his arms, gripping him tightly with a screech as if she wasn't expecting him to lift her.

A few moments later, Jonah, Mae, and Miles entered the kitchen. Miles gave me a wave in a greeting, but didn't say anything as he walked over to the fridge to grab a water. Mae quickly came over to me and wrapped me in a hug.

"Sam invited you to dinner, right?" she asked after placing a soft kiss on my head.

"He didn't," I lied, faking a gasp and looking over to Sam with a smirk.

Sam's eyes widened slightly as Mae detached herself from me and put her hands on her hips, a hard glare overtaking her face as she stared at her young brother in law.

"He's lying!" Sam defended himself, placing Lila down on the floor. "I did ask!"

I chuckled as Mae looked to me with raised eyebrows for confirmation of Sam's words.

"Yeah, he did," I confirmed with a laugh. "I was just kiddin'."

Mae smiled and patted my arm before going over to greet Sam in a way similar to how she greeted me. I exchanged a nod of acknowledgment with Jonah and that was it for our interaction. Jonah and I rarely ever said anything to each other, but I narrowed that down to him not being much of a talker rather than him not liking me. Ever since Sam told me about their mother and how Jonah worked so hard to step up and be there for Sam, I had a new respect for him.

"I don't feel like cooking, so I'm just going to order take out," Mae announced as she poured herself and Jonah each a glass of wine.

"I'll call," Jonah offered, accepting the glass from his wife. "What does everyone want?"

The group decided on Thai food and so, Jonah left the room to go place our order. In about half an hour, the food arrived and Sam and I helped Mae set the table and place the food around. I filled my plate with mango chicken and rice while Sam opted for veggies and chicken. Stupid in season diet making me look like a pig compared to him.

"I have an announcement," Sam said, grabbing everyone's attention once we were settled.

"Let me guess," Jonah started with a teasing smile, "You're gay?"

The whole table, even Miles, erupted into laughter at Jonah's words. Although he didn't talk much, Jonah was still able to get out a few good jokes from time to time.

After Sam sobered up, he continued, "First of all, I don't even know what my sexuality is, second, that's not what I was going to say."

We all waited eagerly for Sam to continue speaking.

He cleared his throat and began again, "Coach said he thinks I'm going to be hearing from the scouts from UCF by the end of the week and that I could be signing with them soon."

The whole table let out cheers of joy at Sam's words. I was beyond excited for him because I knew this was what he worked so hard for. All he wanted to do was be able to play Division One college football and he was finally getting the chance.

"I'm so happy for you!" I exclaimed, leaning over to give him a chaste kiss on the lips.

"Once you sign, we will have a celebration!" Mae proclaimed excitedly, clapping her hands together.

I looked over at Jonah to see that he was smiling wider than I had ever seen him smile before. Pride was practically dripping off of him as he stared at his little brother with admiration.

"I'm going to miss you when you're in Florida," Lila admitted with a frown.

"I'll miss you too," Sam replied, "but I'll visit all the time and I'll be here on breaks. It'll be like I never left."

Conversation turned more casual after that. Mae talked about their day at her parents' house and even Miles told a little story. He was so much like his father when it came to talking. He seldom spoke, but when he did, everyone listened.

"My birthday is next week," Lila told me, incessantly poking me in the arm.

"Is it?" I asked playfully.

"Sam," Mae scolded, looking toward my boyfriend, "Did you forget to invite him to Lila's party?"

We all looked to Sam to see that he gave his sister in law a smile trying to resemble innocence. Sam shrugged as he looked to me.

"I guess I forgot," he admitted. "Hey Mase, do you want to come to Lila's birthday party next weekend?"

"Uncle Sammy!" Lila pouted, crossing her arms over her chest. "I can't believe you forgot."

"Don't mind him, Lila. He's an old, forgetful fart," I joked, looking over at Sam with a playful grin on my lips.

"So will you come?" Lila asked, pulling my attention to her.

"Of course, I will."

***

"And, sent," I said happily, causing a cheer to erupt from my friends.

I had finally sent in my applications for college. I applied to a few schools around here and then to some around Orlando in case I didn't get into UCF. UCF was the goal, but I would settle for anything near where Sam would be. Bella somehow convinced both Ross and Pete to also apply for UCF, so the four of us could be going to the same school after all.

"Ugh!" Bella groaned, throwing herself backwards on my bed. "I want to know if you got in now!"

I chuckled at her and shook my head. "You're so impatient."

"Man, I can't wait to be soaking up the sun in Florida," Pete said with a content sigh.

"Maybe you'll finally stop looking like a pale vampire," Bella joked, sitting up to look at him.

Pete let out a humorless laugh, throwing one of my pillows at her. "You think you're so funny."

Ross and I shared a look as the two of them began to bicker. Maybe in Florida, the two of them would finally get along. I laughed silently to myself. *Like that would ever happen* .

I noticed Ross kept looking down at his phone and I let a smirk make its way onto my face.

"So," I started in a teasing tone, "How are things with Liza?"

Ross's face heated up slightly, but he didn't let my question fluster him.

"Things are good," he answered blandly. Man of few words, he was.

"I still can't believe you got with Liza," Bella interjected with a confused look on her face. "That came out of nowhere."

I rolled my eyes at her ignorance. "It didn't come out of nowhere, you just weren't paying attention."

She glared at me, slipping me her middle finger briefly. The four of us sat in silence after that, all looking down at our phones, I was reading a funny thread on Twitter when all of a sudden Bella ripped me from my thoughts.

"Uh... Mason...?" she trailed apprehensively. "What's this?"

"Hm?" I hummed confusedly, looking up at her from my phone.

Bella had her phone turned to face me and what was on the screen caused my heart to drop into my stomach. The picture on her phone was of Sam and me, one where I was kissed his cheek. My breath staggered as I stared at the picture. The last place that picture should be was on Bella's phone. Why the hell was it on Bella's phone?

"Where the hell did you get that?" I asked in a panicked tone, quickly snatching the phone from her hands.

I swiped on the picture to see that there was another, one where I start up at Sam lovingly. There was no denying it. These pictures made us look like a couple.

"It's online," she said, sounding frustrated.

Ross looked over my shoulder at the picture and let out a gasp at what he saw. He cursed under his breath and stared up at the ceiling in frustration.

"Let me see," Pete demanded. Bella tore the phone from my grasp and handed it over to Pete. Confusion filled his expression and I would be lying if I didn't see him with a hint of disgust.

"What the fuck, Mason?" Bella screeched. "What *is* that?"

I couldn't breathe. Or, maybe I could, but it felt like I wasn't breathing. The air was suffocating me, pressing down on my chest so hard that it felt as if I couldn't move. The only thing on my mind was Sam. I had to get to Sam.

"Are you, like, *with* him?" Pete questioned in a commanding tone.

I couldn't speak. My mind was too consumed with thoughts running rampant through my head that I couldn't form a coherent sentence. Sam. I needed Sam.

"Mason! Say something!" Bella exclaimed angrily. Her face looked redder than I had ever seen it. I could practically see the steam coming out of her ears.

"Bella," Ross growled back, "Chill the fuck out."

"Why should I?" she nearly screeched. "He's the one that's been—"

"Sam," I cut her off, causing all eyes to be on me, "I need to see Sam."

Ross gave me a sympathetic look. "I'll drive you."

I immediately sprung up from my spot on the bed, having Ross follow me down the stairs and out of the house. Luckily, my parents and Nathan weren't home, so I wouldn't have to deal with their questions.

It was the first time I thought of Nathan since I saw the pictures. He was going to be livid. I wanted to be able to tell him about Sam and I on *my* terms, hoping he would be less angry. That plan was now out the window and there was no stopping him from being absolutely furious.

I didn't even remember getting into Ross's car, but I was somehow there and he was driving down the street and out of my neighborhood. I felt myself break out into a cold sweat. This could *not* be happening. I wasn't ready for it.

I wanted nothing more to be able to be in an open relationship with Sam, but on *our* terms. I didn't want either of us to be outed against our will. The thought of someone doing that to us made me uncomfortable, but as I thought about it, those pictures were on Sam's phone. Sam wouldn't... would he—

"Mase," Ross pulled me from my thoughts in a soft tone. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head. "I don't know what's going on. I don't know how this happened."

"Listen," he said, "It's not so bad, alright? You were going to come out soon anyway, it's not a big deal."

I shook my head again. "It *is* a big deal. I wanted to be able to tell a few people at a time, the people I trust, not have it be thrown out there against my will."

Ross looked at me sympathetically.

"I'm sorry this happened," he apologized sullenly. "You deserved to come out in your own way."

I didn't say anything because I couldn't think of anything else to say. Sam. I *needed* to get to Sam.

My stomach clenched uncomfortably when Ross pulled up to Sam's house. There were a few cars out front, showing that there was company over. I couldn't let that unsettle me, I had to talk to Sam no matter who was around.

"Do you want me to wait for you?" Ross asked concernedly.

"No," I answered quickly, swallowing down a deep breath. "I'll probably stay here. I don't want to have to see Nathan tonight."

"Okay," Ross replied. "Call me if you need me."

I thanked him quietly before jumping out of the car and nearly tripping on my way up to the front door. I was breathless even though I barely moved. I had never felt this type of unease before, not even during the early stages of mine and Sam's relationship.

I pounded on the door once I reached it and leaned my hand against the frame. Jonah was the one to answer the door, his eyes widening when he took in my appearance.

"Mason," he started apprehensively, "Are you okay? You don't look so good."

"I need to talk to Sam," I told him with a pleading gaze.

Jonah nodded, moving aside so I could get in the house.

"He's up in his room with his friends," he told me, but I was already walking toward the stairs.

I bypassed Mae and Lila in the living room without giving them a glance. I could hear Lila greet me, but I kept moving. I felt like a jerk, but I would apologize to her for it later.

Much to my surprise, Sam's door was open when I reached the top of the stairs. Laughter from his friends could be heard throughout the hallway. When I heard what they said next, I stopped beside his door to listen.

"This is great," the voice of Owen said, "Nathan is going to be pissed."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. I heard Jake let out a roar of laughter before he spoke.

"That was genius," he started through his chuckles, "Using his brother to get to him, I'm disappointed you didn't tell me about this before, we could have made it more fun."

I couldn't stop myself from letting out a loud gasp. Conversation in the room ceased and I heard someone curse under their breath. I moved to turn around and leave, but the door opened wider and Sam stepped out, stopping me in my tracks.

"Mase..." he trailed in a soft tone, his wide eyes looking sympathetic.

I wouldn't fall for it. He was a manipulative con artist and I wouldn't fall for it anymore.

"Don't," I choked out, "Don't come near me."

An audience appeared behind Sam, but I paid them no mind. The only one I shot a scowl at was Christo to which he returned it with a sad look of his own.

"Mason, please let me explain," Sam pleaded, reaching out for me.

"No, you're sick," I spat, "You all are." I backed away from him, sending him a warning look to keep his hands away from me.

"You don't under—"

"I understand perfectly!" I screamed, cutting him off. "You used me in your sick little game to get to my brother! I get it!"

"No, Mason," Sam let out with a sad look, shaking his head at me. His eyes were glistening, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

I turned to walk down the stairs, but I was quickly grabbed on the arm by Sam. I ripped my arm out of his grip and sent him my harshest glare I could muster up.

"Please listen to me," he begged.

I shook my head fiercely. "I can't listen to you right now." I felt my eyes well up, but I refused to let a tear fall. Not in front of *them* .

I started down the stairs, Sam following closely behind me while his friends watched from the top of the stairs.

"Let me explain!" Sam exclaimed loudly and almost angrily, grabbing my wrist.

I tore myself from his grasp once again.

"Fine! Explain it to me then!" I screamed back, my voice wavering. I took a deep breath, noticing that we had the attention of Sam's friends and his family.

Sam just stood in front of me with a dumb expression on his face. His mouth hung open but no words came out. I waited a few more moments, begging him with my eyes for him to tell me this was all a misunderstanding but he said nothing. He just looked at me with sad eyes as if there was no explanation that would make this right.

"You *used me!* " I seethed angrily after he never spoke up, my face beating red. "You made me trust you. You made me *love* you and it was all for you to mess with me and my brother!"

Sam's eyes widened at my words. He looked speechless and I didn't want to give him a chance to find anything to say, so I continued.

"You don't even understand how twisted and sadistic that is!" I continued through gritted teeth. My hands formed into tight fists, my knuckles white. "You manipulated me, you played with my emotions, you made me think you *cared* ."

"I do care—"

"You don't," I let out a humorless laugh. It was a laugh of pity for getting myself into this situation. "You don't care and neither do I. This is done, whatever it is to you, it's done."

I turned on my heel to walk out of the house, noticing the wide gazes of Jonah, Mae, and Lila. I swore I saw tears streaming down poor Lila's

cheeks. Sam's footsteps followed behind me, obviously not getting the hint. Once we were outside, I stomped down the porch steps and onto the driveway.

"Mason, I'm not going to let you walk home right now," Sam said as he followed closely behind me. "You don't have to get in my car, but I'm going to at least walk you home."

I ignored him, keeping my fists tightly at my sides. My feet hurt from pounding them so hard on the pavement, but I still continued to do so.

"Samuel!" Jonah's voice called out. I heard his footsteps patter behind us as if he was jogging to catch up. He said something quietly to Sam and then there was silence. I let out a breath of relief, thinking I was finally left alone.

"Mason," Jonah said softly from behind me. I nearly jumped when he spoke. I had never heard him use this tone of voice before. It sounded foreign coming from his lips.

I stopped when Jonah placed a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Please let me drive you home," Jonah pleaded, "It's late and it's too far."

His tone was so soft, it reminded me of my own father trying to comfort me and that was when the dam broke. I brought both of my hands up to cover my face as I choked out a throaty sob. I didn't even know I could wail the way I did, but I had never felt as low as I did now so there was never a reason to.

Jonah placed his hand softly on my back, rubbing it slightly in a soothing manner. He guided me to turn around and walk toward his car and I let him. I was at the point of giving up.

"Are you going to let me drive you home?" he asked softly and sympathetically.

I kept my hands on my face, getting them wet from my tears. Jonah guided me to his car and opened the passenger's door for me. I uncovered my face as I got in the car, but my vision was blurry from the water in my eyes.

As Jonah started the car and peeled out of the driveway, I leaned my head on the cool window as warm, incessant tears pooled in my eyes and flooded down my face faster than I knew was possible.

An hour ago, my life was fine.

But apparently, it only took a matter of minutes for my entire world to come crashing down and crush me with the debris.

**

So... that just happened. Please let me know what you think!

Thoughts on the chapter? Any predictions for what will happen next?

Six chapters left!

42

Mason Maloney

Jonah didn't say anything as I sobbed in the passenger's seat of his car. I tried to quiet my cries, but every time I tried, a louder sob would rip through my throat. I could feel his eyes travel to me briefly as he drove toward my house, but he still didn't say anything, not that I expected him to.

I didn't notice the car had stopped and we reached my house until Jonah placed his hand on my shoulder. I looked at him through my stinging eyes while he gave me an unreadable expression.

"Whatever it is, I hope you two can work it out," Jonah encouraged kindly.

I gulped and took a deep breath. Of course, he had no idea exactly what his brother had done to me. He thought our relationship was genuine.

"We can't," I rasped, shaking my head and looking down at my lap.

We were silent for a few moments before I gazed through the window to see that the downstairs lights were on in my house and our car was parked in its rightful spot in the driveway. I sighed, knowing I wasn't ready to face Nathan yet.

"Thanks for the ride," I mumbled, opening the door and beginning to step out of the car.

"Mason," Jonah stopped me. I waited for him to continue as I stood outside the car with the door open. "I don't know what Sam did, but I do know that he's crazy about you. Please know that."

I nodded, not being able to find the words to respond. Since knowing Jonah, I had never seen him look so concerned. He never bothered much with me while I was dating Sam, but as I cried in his car he spoke more words to me

than I had ever heard him say to anyone. I waved to him before trudging up to my house, hoping I could get into my room before running into Nathan.

Luck was obviously not on my side and that was evident when Nathan opened the front door with a deep frown on his face and his eyes narrowed in a scowl before my hand even had a chance to touch the doorknob.

I quickly pushed past my brother and headed toward the stairs, but of course, he had to stop me.

"You're really not going to say anything?" Nathan hissed, grabbing my shoulder and turning me around.

There was no concern found in Nathan's expression, just anger. It didn't matter to him that I looked broken, that I was visibly upset. He was more concerned about his own stupid rivalry with Sam.

"What were you thinking?" Nathan's voiced thundered and echoed throughout the house. " *He* was your mystery guy? Sam Knight? Are you that fucking stupid?"

I shoved him off of me angrily. After the night I had, I already felt stupid enough. I didn't need Nathan to throw my stupidity and my failed relationship in my face. I was sure my expression matched my twin's furious one at this point.

"Yeah, apparently I am!" I seethed, my fists forming at my sides.

Nathan let out a frustrated huff, placing his hands on his hips and shaking his head. His frown grew more prominent, looking as if it was going to become a permanent fixture on his face.

"What did you think was going to happen?" Nathan bellowed, throwing his hands up in the air before bringing them back down to pull at his hair. "Did you really think he was going to love you?"

I stayed silent, my heart seeming absent in my chest.

"God, Mase. You're so selfish!" Nathan screamed.

That was what made me crack.

"I'm selfish?" I sneered, letting out a humorless laugh. "I'm selfish? *You're* the selfish one! You think everything is about you! Do you think I did this to hurt you? Do you think all of my decisions based on you?"

"I think," Nathan started in an icy tone, "that you *didn't* think before you got involved with him. I told you from the start that he would try to use you to get to me and that's what he did, didn't he? That's why you're crying, right? That's what he did?"

I didn't answer which caused Nathan to get even angrier.

"Didn't he?" he fumed loudly.

"Yes! Fine, Nathan, yes. Is that what you want to hear?" I croaked out angrily. "You want to hear that you were right and I fell for it?"

"If you had just listened—"

"You want to hear about how *stupid* I am for falling for it? About how my heart is broken?" My voice cracked on the last word, surprising both Nathan and I.

For the first time tonight, my brother looked slightly concerned with my well-being. He made sure to clear his face of concern fairly quickly and replaced it with a look of irritation.

"I need to tell you something about Sam. I should've told you sooner. *Fuck!* " Nathan shouted in frustration.

"What are you talking about?" I whined, wanting nothing more than to get up to my room.

"He has a track record for this sort of thing," Nathan admitted. My heart froze at his words.

"What?"

Nathan let out a few heavy breaths before continuing.

"Whenever he hooked up with one of the cheerleaders, he would brag about it to me and send pictures of them together," Nathan told me through gritted teeth.

My eyes produced even more tears at his confession.

"He... *fuck* ," Nathan continued, shaking his head. "Remember when I dated Cindy sophomore year?"

I nodded, unable to find my voice.

"We broke up because he slept with her. He convinced her that he liked her and she *cheated* on me with him," Nathan spat, a disgusted look taking over his face.

Before Nathan could say anything else to me, I turned quickly on my heel and dashed up the stairs to lock myself in my room.

The first thing I did when I got to my room was pick up my phone, that I left on the nightstand, and call Ross. He was quick to pick up, he always was since I had been jumped. Through my sobs, I rehashed all the events of tonight to him. He listened to me while I wailed and cried and offered me soothing words. After I got it all out, I hung up, knowing I needed to cry some more.

I threw myself face down on my bed and screamed into my pillow as more tears flew freely from my eyes. My heart appeared in my chest again and this time it lurched and ached like I had never felt before. My whole body was in pain.

And all I wanted was to feel nothing.

***

Sam Knight

My mind was racing along with my heart. What just happened? What the *fuck* just happened? I stormed back into the house after Jonah convinced me he would get Mason home safely. Once I was back in the house, I slammed the door shut behind me and was faced with five pairs of eyes staring at me as wide as saucers.

Mae was the first to speak up, "What the hell just happened?"

I let out a heavy sigh, smacking my hands to my face out of frustration. I couldn't even explain what just went on. One moment I was sitting in my bedroom uncomfortable as my friends talked about my boyfriend, and the next I had been dumped.

"Dude," Jake interrupted my thoughts. My head snapped toward him with a deadly scowl, though I suppose what went on was my fault and not his. I was too angry to care.

"Can you all just go?" I asked, though it was more of a command than a question.

Jake shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. "Not until you explain."

My anger toward Jake was irrational. It was my fault that he thought I had been using Mason the whole time because I never told him anything different. I let him believe that because I didn't want to admit the truth to him. I was still pissed at him though. Beyond pissed.

"Why was Masey so mad?" Lila asked through her sniffles, wiping her teary eyes with her hands.

"It was just a misunderstanding, Lila, don't worry about it," I consoled her as best as I could. Mae gave me a wary look, but didn't say anything.

"Is he still going to come to my birthday party?" she asked sadly.

I didn't want to lie to her, but I didn't want her to get upset either.

"I don't know," I admitted and her lip quivered. "But I'm sure he will. He loves you."

"Seriously," Owen interjected. "What is going on? What was all of that about?"

The last thing I wanted to do was explain myself to them. I would rather lock myself in my room and call Mason until he picked up the phone, but I had a feeling I wouldn't get the chance to do that until my friends were satisfied.

Suddenly, the front door opened and slammed shut. Jonah entered the living room looking perplexed and slightly agitated, that agitation being directed toward me.

"What the hell did you do to him?" he asked, stepping closer and pointing his finger at me.

The last thing I needed at that moment was for Jonah to be bitching at me. He did that enough.

"Can you all just leave me the fuck alone?" I snapped, looking toward my brother.

He smacked my shoulder hard, causing pain that had gone away to come rushing back.

"Don't you swear in front of Lila," he demanded.

I had nearly forgotten she was there. My eyes traveled to where my niece sat on the couch, looking scared as she held her hands over her ears. I gave her an apologetic look before Mae pulled one hand away from her ear and whispered to her. Lila got up from the couch and walked by my friends to get to the stairs, presumably to go to her room.

"Now, can you tell us what's going on?" Mae questioned, looking directly at me.

I sighed and rubbed my temples with my fingers.

"Mase thinks I used him to get to Nathan," I confessed, the words tasting like poison as I did so.

Mae raised her eyebrows and shared a look with her husband.

"And did you?" Jonah demanded in an accusatory tone.

"Of course not," I retorted, shooting him a scowl.

"You didn't?" Jake asked, sounding confused. "Then what was the point of the pictures?"

"He was my boyfriend, you asshole," I seethed, stepping closer to my friends. "That's why I had those pictures. They weren't there for some elaborate scheme or for you to post on the internet."

Jake held his hands in front of him in defense. "How was I supposed to know that? I saw the pictures and thought it was gold! When I said something about it, you just let me believe that it was a plan to mess with Nathan!"

I knew he was right, but I was still angry. He never should have posted those pictures. It wasn't his place.

Owen still looked confused while Christo looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but here. I knew the situation must have been awkward for him. He liked hanging out with Mason and I and now there was no 'Mason and I.'

"Then why did you let me think that they were?" Jake questioned me in an annoyed tone, throwing his hands in the air.

"Because you made me feel stupid!" I fought back. "When you found them, I was going to come out to you, but you made me feel like I couldn't!"

What I said was true. When Jake found the pictures, he was so excited thinking I had developed some great plan all on my own. I wanted to tell him the truth and own up to what was really going on with Mason and me, but Jake kept laughing and saying that he "knew one of the Maloney brothers had to be a homo."

It made me feel unsafe in my own home. I had never felt ashamed of who I was, and it was out of character for me to feel insecure about my sexuality, but we all had our insecurities. The way Jake, and Owen, were talking made me feel like if I did come out to them that I was going to be shamed for it. So, I panicked and let him think what he wanted to think. I was going to explain the situation to Mason later and I knew he would understand. But of course, the universe hated me and had him overhear what Jake was saying and it all went downhill from there.

Jake didn't look the slightest bit remorseful at my words. Instead, he stood confidently with a defiant glare directed at me.

"You should have manned up and told me," Jake said in a low tone. "Did you think I was going to bully you or something?"

"I don't know," I groaned. "I just panicked and probably would have come clean about it within a few minutes if Mason didn't show up. I should've known he would."

"You need to fix this," Jonah commanded, dragging my attention toward him. "The kid is devastated."

"So you're gay?" Owen asked dumbly. I shot daggers at him and didn't answer while everyone else also gave him an angry eye.

My thoughts were moving so quickly in my head, I didn't even have time to think about how I *felt.* Seeing Mason look so upset broke my heart. The frustration in me swelled as I thought about how his stubborn ass didn't let me get a word in. He never did.

That frustration was overcame by a rush of sadness at the reminder that Mason had broken up with me. Not only that, but he was feeling terrible because he thought that he had meant nothing to me when that couldn't have been further from the truth. Mason was my world, he still was.

"I love him," I announced suddenly, without giving the words much thought. I didn't really need to, I knew how I felt about him.

Shocked stares met my words, as of none of them believed I had actually just said that. It wasn't a shock to me. I was sure I had felt this way about Mason for a while. I just never said it out loud.

"Sam..." Jonah trailed softly, coming closer to me.

I let out a deep breath and shuddered as I thought about the status of my relationship. Mason would never want me again. What we had was ruined and I was going to be left in love and alone.

"He won't want me anymore," I muttered, looking down at my shoes and noticing a spec of dirt had invaded my otherwise perfectly clean shoes.

It was like my relationship. This one taint, this one imperfection, ruined the whole thing.

I finally let the sadness take over after my newfound realization. I lost Mason and I would probably never get him back. He would either never let me explain to him, or, wouldn't believe me if I did.

I brushed past my friends heading toward the stairs, my feet feeling heavy as I moved. I stopped in front of Jake and the two of us held each other's stares for a few moments before I broke the silence.

"I guess the plan backfired," I said sullenly. "Because it got to me, not Nathan."

Before Jake could respond, I was up the stairs and in my room with the door closed and my phone in hand. I debated on whether I should call Mason. After thinking about it, he could probably use some space from me. I would call him tomorrow or in a few days, though it was going to kill me to wait. I would do it for him. I would respect his space and wait for a good time to try and make amends. However, I supposed no time would be a good time.

I lied down on my bed, facing the ceiling with my hands folded over my stomach, reflecting on everything that had happened tonight. I tried not to feel sorry for myself, but I couldn't help but feel like the universe was out to

get me. *Of course, Mason had to hear what Jake was saying.* Of course, the one perfect thing in my life had to come to an end.

I wanted to stop feeling sorry for myself because all that mattered at that moment was Mason and how he felt. I would do anything to make sure he knew how I really felt about him.

And I would get him back, no matter what it took.

**

So for those of you who don't know, Knight reached one million reads!!! I just want to thank every person who even read just a word of this book. You guys are all awesome! That's why I decided to give you an early update because you deserve it!

After doing some thinking, I also decided I would post the first chapter of my new book so you could check it out! I won't start updating that until Knight is done, but go check it out if you like! It's called "On Thin Ice" I'll post the description below:

"After his religious mother kicks him out for being gay, Elijah Ellis moves in with his father, where his step-mother, step-brother, and half-sister also welcome him.

Elijah aspires to continue doing what he loves and play hockey for his new school, but his past hookup with the closeted hockey captain, Fox Ridley, complicates things. While Elijah just wants to get through the season unscathed, Fox his hellbent on hating him.

Elijah is unsure whether he will ever overcome Fox's hatred, or if he will remain on thin ice."

The first chapter is available now!! Go give it a read if you're interested.

OKAY,

What did you think of the chapter? What did you think of Nathan's reaction and what he told Mason about Sam? Did you like seeing things from Sam's point of view? Do you understand where he's coming from or do you think he's being an ass?

43

TRIGGER WARNING: use of homophobic slur

Mason Maloney

My pillow was still damp from my tears when I woke up the next morning. I was facedown, having trouble breathing, but I had a feeling even if I sat up, I wouldn't be able to breathe any better than I was.

I sat up with a cough, trying to clear my throat from the liquid that had lodged itself back there after I fell asleep during my sobs.

I couldn't face everyone today. There was no doubt that I would be the biggest topic of conversation at school. Maybe if I just stayed in bed, Nathan would leave without me. I was sure he wouldn't want to see me today after our fight. I could stay in my room so my parents wouldn't see me and Nathan would go to school and then I could have the whole house to myself.

It seemed like the perfect plan until a loud pounding sounded on my door. I groaned, pulling my pillow over my head to try and drown out the noise. Suddenly, the pounding stopped and my door was swung open so harshly that it hit the wall with a thud. I still kept my head down, knowing it was Nathan who had barged in my room.

"Get up," my brother demanded, pulling the covers off of me.

I didn't acknowledge him. Instead, I ignored him in hopes that he would give up and leave me alone. Though, I knew I didn't have such luck. If Nathan was determined to get me out of bed, he would.

"Mason," Nathan growled, shoving me hard to turn me over. "You're going to school."

I moved the pillow away from my face and stared at him through my stinging eyes. He looked as angry as he did the night before, his vein popping out prominently on his neck. Nathan stood with his hands on his hips, fully dressed for school as he stood over me impatiently.

"Don't be a coward," he said in a condescending tone. "Get up and get ready, *now* ."

I hesitantly stood up from my bed as Nathan watched my every move. I threw open my drawers and pulled out the first outfit I could find, loose fitting jeans and sweatshirt. Nathan's eyes burned my skin, causing me to leave the room to go to the bathroom to get dressed.

The first time I looked at myself in the mirror since yesterday caused me to see an alarming sight. My eyes were red and swollen while the skin on my face looked irritated from the amount of times I dragged my hands across it to wipe my tears. My hair was a mess and my expression was blank. I didn't look right, and definitely didn't look like myself.

I got dressed anyway, knowing Nathan would break the door down if I didn't. After doing my business, brushing my teeth, and putting some water through my hair and on my face, I made my way back to my room to put my dirty clothes in my hamper. Nathan sat on my bed, looking angrily down at his phone. When he saw that I was ready, he stood up and made his way to my bedroom door.

"Let's go," he grumbled, bumping his shoulder against mine harshly. My own brother was being cold to me over this, I couldn't imagine how the rest of the school was going to react to it.

Part of me wanted to push Nathan out of my room and lock the door, but I knew it would be no use. He would call my parents and figure out some way to get me out of my room and to school. I wondered if he was so adamant about me going to school because he didn't want me to sit around being sad all day, or, if he wanted to punish me for what I had done by making me endure the wrath of our entire student body. Maybe it was a little bit of both.

When the two of us got in our car, we were silent. Not even the radio was on to fill the void between us. It was like Nathan was deliberately trying to make me uncomfortable. Maybe he was.

Nathan was quick to leave the car once we got to school as if he didn't want to be seen with me. I was sure he didn't, not after the pictures had dropped last night. Surely, most of the people at our school had seen them by now, and if they hadn't, they would by the end of the day.

I took a deep breath before exiting the car, making sure to lock the doors before I left. The air around me was as thick as the tension and the stares were immediate and constant. It didn't take long for someone to stop in front of me, blocking my path to the school.

"Sleeping with the enemy, huh?" the guy said, causing his friends around him to engage in a chorus of laughter. I didn't even know any of their names and we probably never would have crossed paths on any other occasion.

I tried to walk around the group of guys, but they were quick to stop me, grabbing onto my shoulders to hold me into place. I wasn't sure if they were going to start pounding me or not, but I had a feeling they wouldn't. If I was anyone else, they would, but since I was Nathan Maloney's brother, people knew he wouldn't take kindly to anyone who laid a hand on me. It was an unspoken rule and I doubted it was about to be broken, so I stared at the guys blankly and waited for them to let me leave.

"Should've known Knight was a faggot," one of them said with a cunning laugh. "But you too, Maloney? Shame."

I glared at him and his choice of words, but didn't say anything. The sooner they let me go, the better. If I stayed silent instead of giving in and giving them the fight that they waned, then eventually I would bore them and I would be free.

"Hey!" a shrill female voice, that I recognized as Bella's, screeched from behind us.

We each turned to look a the petite girl who stood with her hands on her hips with a scowl etched onto her face. Bella stomped right over to the guy who was holding onto my shoulders and pushed him so that she was standing in between us. She was a lot smaller than me, so she wasn't much protection, but she was angry enough now to scare even the largest guy here.

"Back off, *Todd* ," she seethed, poking his chest with her freshly manicured finger.

Todd grabbed her hand in his. "Don't think I forgot that you're a traitor too, Bell. You slept with the Knight."

Bella ripped her hand away and poked his chest again, harder this time.

"Then what makes me any different than Mason?" she asked him angrily to which Todd let out a loud laugh.

"You're joking, right?" Todd laughed along with his buddies. "Mason sleeping with the Knight *directly* affects Nathan, it's not a big deal that you did it, but *him*, " he paused, pointing over at me, "When it's Nathan's brother, it's *obviously* a direct attack to the Warriors."

"Do you hear yourself when you talk?" Bella deadpanned, putting her hands back on her narrow hips, "because you sound ridiculous."

"Bell," I called out, causing her to look at me. "Let's just go," I pleaded, grabbing onto her arm.

Bella looked to Todd once more before looking back at me with a soft expression and nodding. She looped her arm through mine and pulled me through the crowd that had formed in the parking lot. Bella shot a glare at every person that was harsh enough to cause them to disperse and let us through.

"Thanks, Bell," I muttered, looking down at the floor once we were inside the school, Bella's arm still looped through mine.

She looked at me and let out a long sigh. "I'm still really pissed that you didn't tell me about you and Sam, but I'm sorry for yelling at you."

"It's alright," I told her truthfully. Even if I was a little mad at her for the way she acted, she was apologizing and I would rather her be my friend than my enemy like the rest of the school.

"Ross explained everything to me and Pete," Bella admitted as we stopped by my locker. "He told us about how you two are dating and were going to wait until football season was over to come out. I get why you wanted to do that."

"Were dating," I murmured quietly, tossing my locker door open.

"What?" she questioned quizzically, quirking her head to the side curiously.

"I broke up with him last night," I told her, looking at her out of the corner of my eye.

Bella stared at me with a gaping expression. "Because of the pictures?"

I shook my head. "He used me to get to Nathan. I thought what we had a was real, but it wasn't."

Bella's face turned from shocked to furious within a few seconds. She crossed her arms over her chest and set her jaw tightly.

"That *bastard* ," she hissed through gritted teeth. "I'm going to kill him. He better hope I don't get my hands on him because I—"

"Bella, stop," I cut her off, "It doesn't matter, it's done."

She gave me a sympathetic look just as Ross and Pete made their way over to us. The copious amounts of stares I was receiving went unnoticed while I was speaking to Bella, but as I looked around, they were all I noticed.

"Hey," Pete said, causing me to look at him and his concerned features. "How you holdin' up?"

I could tell that Ross had filled him in about mine and Sam's break up because if he hadn't, I knew Pete wouldn't be too concerned about how I was feeling. He would have tried to say something funny about the pictures or about me being gay. The only way he wouldn't was if Ross warned him and told him about what went on.

When I didn't say anything, Ross stepped forward and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Mase, are you okay?" he asked concernedly.

"I'm fine," I said, though none of my friends looked convinced.

I sighed and slammed my locker shut, causing Bella to jump back and bump into Pete. He steadied her without taking his gaze off of me.

"Maybe we should all skip today," Pete suggested, Bella's face immediately lighting up in agreement.

While this morning I wanted to stay home, I figured since I was already at school I should just stay there. Not to mention, if I left with my friends I'd have all three of them breathing down my neck all day. At least at school I could get away from their pity, even though I had to deal with the judgement of others.

"No, it's fine," I told them seriously.

"Okay," Ross said apprehensively. "Just try to ignore everyone. What they have to say doesn't matter."

"Yeah, none of them know shit," Pete agreed

A few moments later, the warning bell rang and I bid my friends a goodbye before walking off toward my first period. I tried to ignore everyone, but it was hard when people pointed at me and started whispering to their friends not so quietly.

"If we lose on Friday, you're gonna get it, Maloney," one guy spat at me as I scurried by. I kept my head down, not wanting any confrontation.

I wanted to tell them that if Nathan let this affect the way he played, it was on him not me. No matter what I did, it was Nathan's problem if he couldn't focus. I knew deep down, Nathan knew that too.

But it didn't matter. The entire student body took this as a personal attack on the Warriors and saw me as an aid to the Knights. They just wanted a reason to hate the Knights more, it had nothing to do with me. It was just the stupid rivalry ruining everything like it always did.

Later on in the day at lunch, the whispers and stares had gotten worse. Or, it seemed like they had considering I was around so many people at once. I was nudged and pushed by a group of guys in the lunch line and a group of girls gossiped about me loudly as if I wasn't standing right next to them. Bella's book club friends wouldn't even sit at our table.

"To hell with them," Bella said angrily, stabbing her fork in her salad. "I don't want to be friends with them if they're going to be bitches."

"At least Wendy is off your back," Pete joked from across the table.

I nodded in agreement but didn't say anything as Ross and Liza made their way to the table. Ross sat down beside me and Liza took the seat on his other side, offering me a kind greeting.

"Anyone give you any trouble?" Ross questioned me with his eyebrows raised.

I shook my head. "Nothing I can't handle."

"This is all bullshit," Bella hissed. "These people are acting like you've committed treason," she said loud enough for the girls at the table next to us to hear, looking at them with daggers for eyes as she spoke every word.

"I think people are being over dramatic," Liza agreed. "I heard a few girls talking about it in my art class and they were practically in tears. I couldn't tell if they were upset about the situation or that they have no chance with Sam now."

"I think I dodged a bullet with Cami," Pete added, gazing at me, "She told me today that she doesn't want to sit with you at the game Friday and I told her she wouldn't be sitting with me then."

"You didn't have to do that," I mumbled, looking down at my plate.

"Yeah, I did," Pete replied, "If she's gonna bitch about you then I don't want her."

I was surprised Pete was being as supportive as he was, same with Bella. I thought for sure Pete would be weirded out and Bella would be pissed at me, but the two of them had shown me how strong our friendship actually was.

"How you holding up, Mase?" Bella asked concernedly. "Do you think you can stay for the rest of the day? Just say the word and we can leave."

I gave her an appreciative smile. "I'll be okay."

The whispers and gossip hadn't been as bad asI anticipated. They were easy to ignore during class and in the hallway. As long as I kept my head down and didn't interact with them, I could imagine today was just a regular day.

The gaping hole in my chest from where my heart had been ripped out still had not been repaired. Thinking about Sam hurt and it was hard to keep my mind off of him.

I was stupid enough to think that he truly cared for me, but I was too prideful to even think what Nathan had warned me about had any truth to it. No part of me wanted to believe that Sam had cruel intentions with me and that showed just how naive I actually was.

Sam had succeeded in doing exactly what he wanted: unsettling the Warriors, and more specifically, getting to Nathan.

He just so happened to destroy me in the process.

**

Sorry about the wait!

What did you think of the chapter? Do you think Mason is handling the situation well? What did you think about Bella and Pete's reactions?

Next update is going to be Wednesday so I can get back on schedule.

44

Mason Maloney

The next day at school wasn't really any better. Nathan hadn't said more than two words to me since the morning before and left me to fend for myself for a ride to work. Luckily, Ross offered to drive me to and from work. Another positive was that since Sam had advanced to the championship game, he was having extended practices so I wouldn't have to see him at work. I didn't think I would be able to face him again. I didn't know if I ever would be able to again.

The next day, close to the end of the school day, I was sitting in my history class. I zoned out, staring straight ahead at the board and tried not to focus on the incessant kicking on the back of my chair by one of the guys on the football team. A few Nathan's teammates were in my class and, usually, we would exchange pleasantries and not speak much after that. But ever since it was found out that I had been with Sam, they didn't try to hide their distaste.

"Maloney," the football player, Braeden, hissed, kicking my chair again.

I ignored him which only caused him to kick my chair again.

"Listen, Nathan wanted me to tell you he wants you to come to the locker room real quick after class," Braeden told me. I just nodded in response, letting him know that I heard what he said.

Soon after, the bell rang and I took my time gathering my things and standing up from my seat. Braeden and his two other friends stood behind me, waiting for me to follow them toward the locker room. I had no idea what Nathan wanted, but I was pretty desperate to get him to talk to me. I was still angry at him for the way he was acting, but I would much rather us be at odds with each other and still speaking than ignoring each other's existence.

Braeden and his friends followed me toward the locker room. I shoved the door open and was to confused to see that no one was there yet. I turned to face Braeden, and as I did, he shoved me down on to the floor. I should have known.

"Seriously?" I spat, looking up at the three football players standing over me with a hard scowl.

"Shut up," Braeden growled, kicking me in the stomach.

I hunched over in pain, letting out a groan. The pain was similar to when I had gotten beat up before, only this time I had emotional pain in me that undoubtedly felt worse.

"Nathan's going to be here any minute and you're going to beat the shit out of me?" I choked out in disbelief. There was no way Nathan knew about this. No matter how angry he was at me, I knew he would never let this happen.

Braeden shook his head with a sinister smile, crouching down to be at my eye level.

"Nathan won't be here, he spent last period with most of the team who had free period on the field," he explained.

Braeden stood up and kicked me again, eliciting a raspy groan and cough from my throat. Then he grabbed me by my shirt and shoved me roughly against the lockers. I swallowed a lump in my throat.

"Braeden maybe we shouldn't–" one of the worried looking football players started to say.

"Shut up," he spat in a reply. "He deserves what's coming to him."

I braced myself for the impact when I saw Braeden draw back his fist, but the punch never came. Braeden was roughly pulled away from me and I heard his body slam against the lockers across from me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Nathan holding Braeden by the throat against the lockers. My eyes widened at the sight, but I stayed put. Tony and Rick stood off to the side, glaring at their other two teammates and stood as if they were blocking them from getting to me.

"Nathan," I croaked out, my voice raspy. He whipped his head around to look at me, his hand still tight on Braeden's neck.

"Don't," I pleaded, looking straight into his furious eyes.

Nathan and I held eye contact for a few more moments before he looked to Braeden and released him, but not before shoving him one last time.

"Go home, you're done for the season," Nathan commanded sternly.

Braeden's eyes widened. "You can't do that! I worked my ass off this season. You can't bench me for the championship!"

"I can and I am," Nathan answered in a powerful tone. "You crossed a line going after my brother. You should've known better. Did you honestly think I wouldn't find out?"

Braeden's eyes were a fiery image of rage as he stared down my brother in disbelief.

"Your *brother* ," he seethed angrily, pointing over at me, "is a traitor and a filthy *fa–"*

Nathan didn't let him finish his sentence. Instead he wound his fist back and socked him in the face before he could get another word out.

" *Get out* ," Nathan growled. Braeden shook his head at him in disbelief, but obeyed anyway, grabbing his things and leaving the locker room.

"Mason," Tony called out once Braeden was out of the locker room. "Did he hurt you?"

I shook my head just as the worried looking football player from before spoke.

"Braeden kicked him pretty hard in the stomach," he said, causing Nathan's eyes to darken and throb to start in my stomach. I was too afraid to stand up straight, fearing I would hurt myself even further.

"Let me see it," Nathan muttered, stepping closer to me.

"It's fine," I tried to assure him.

Nathan motioned for the other guys to look away and they did so before he reached out and lifted my shirt. I didn't even want to look down to see if it bruised, I already knew it had and by the look on Nathan's face, it was pretty bad. The pain only got worse when I paid this much attention to it. It throbbed and ached, giving me more trouble with breathing than I already had from my emotional pain.

"You need to ice that," my brother grumbled through gritted teeth, dropping my shirt so that the fabric covered me once again.

"I have to go to work," I replied, noticing Tony and Rick glance warily in our direction.

Nathan shook his head. "Fine, I don't care what you do."

Nathan started walking back toward the exit of the locker room that let out near the field. He stopped and looked at Braeden's accomplices and shot them each a flare that had them looking frightened.

"You two are lucky you're not getting the same treatment as Braeden," he spat, "Get dressed and get out on the field."

And with that, Nathan was gone, the five of us watching as he went. The two football players quickly grabbed their bags and scurried off to their lockers while I looked down at the floor.

"Mason," Tony grabbed my attention, causing me to look up at him, "Nathan didn't mean that. He does care, he just doesn't want to."

I just shrugged, wincing as I moved. I wasn't surprised that Tony wasn't angry with me about the situation. He was always compassionate and

lenient toward the Knights considering Christo was his cousin and the two of them appeared to be relatively close. However, it did surprise me that Rick wasn't spitting insults at me.

"Why aren't you two pissed at me?" I found the courage to ask, staring at Rick accusingly.

"We aren't idiots like you and your brother and everyone else around here," Rick deadpanned, rolling his eyes.

Tony glared at him before turning to me with a softer expression.

"What happened wasn't your fault," Tony explained. "We get that."

"Yeah," Rick agreed in a slightly irritated tone. "Knight obviously manipulated you, it's not your fault you're dumb. Nathan's anger is directed at him, but he can't go after him so he's taking it out on you. He'll get over it."

I nodded in understanding, stepping forward to make my way out of the locker room, my body aching with my movements. I tried my hardest not to wince and I couldn't even tell if it worked.

"But Nathan's right," Tony stopped me, placing a hand on my shoulder, "you should ice that."

Instead of replying, I left the locker room and scurried toward the parking lot in hopes to find Ross so he could drive me to work. Not to mention, now that Braeden had nothing to lose, he could be waiting around a corner to pound me. Luckily, when I got outside, Ross was waiting for me inside his car with Liza in the passenger's seat.

"What took you so long?" Ross asked, turning around to face me.

"Long story," I mumbled, adding a small, quiet greeting to Liza.

Conversation ceased as Ross pulled out of the parking lot to drive me to work, his and Liza's hands intertwined on the center console. I wished that I

could feel happy for him for finally making a move on her, but nothing at that moment could make me feel happy.

I bid Ross and Liza each a goodbye once we reached the bakery. Charlene instantly greeted me as soon as I walked in, pulling me into a hug.

"Mase!" she exclaimed, holding me tightly. "Hope you don't mind me closing up with you tonight."

I plastered a fake smile on my face. "I don't mind at all."

Any company was better than Sam's company and I could have been stuck with someone a lot worse than Charlene like I was yesterday with Sandy.

When Charlene and I closed up the bakery, Ross was there to pick me up like he said he would be, this time void of Liza. We didn't speak much as he drove me home. I wasn't in the mood for speaking and my stomach still hurt from earlier in the day. All I wanted to do was lie down and go to sleep.

I thanked Ross as I got out of his car and then made my way into my house. My parents were in the living room with Nathan and immediately stopped me from bypassing them.

"What's going on with you?" Dad asked seriously. "Don't think that we haven't noticed."

I didn't say anything, letting out a sigh and plopping down on the couch beside my father, knowing he wouldn't be letting me or Nathan go upstairs until we had a talk. Our parents were serious when they said they wanted us to be more open with them and we hadn't had a good start.

"We can tell when you two aren't getting along," Mom added, looking between Nathan and I. "The whole house is unbalanced when you two are at odds."

"Ask Mason," Nathan his, gesturing toward me, "It's his fault."

"Don't go blaming your brother," Dad warned in a serious tone.

"He's been keeping a secret from you," Nathan continued, staring straight at me. Outing me to our parents would be betraying me. Nathan knew that, yet he was still threatening me with it.

"Mason?" Mom asked softly, "Honey, you can tell us anything."

I glared at Nathan, hopefully sending him a message through my eyes. If he did this, outed me, there was no going back. And although we both knew our parents would be cool with me being gay, it wasn't cool for him to tell them for me. Nathan seemed to get the message and backed down, looking away from me.

"I just said that because I was mad," Nathan mumbled his lie, "It's nothing."

Our parents exchanged suspicious looks, but didn't press us any further about my secret and I was grateful for that.

"So, what's going on between the two of you?" Dad asked us, looking between the both of us for an answer.

"Nothing," Nathan answered first.

"He's just in a mood," I added with a hint of sass in my tone, "with the game coming up."

He shot me an icy glare, but did not try to contradict my statement. I leaned forward, forgetting about the pain in my stomach momentarily, and let out a hiss of pain. This action gained the attention of my parents in my brother who were all looking at me in concern.

"Mase, are you hurt?" Mom asked worriedly, leaning over to place her hand comfortingly on my knee.

"I fell in gym today," I lied, looking to Nathan to make sure he wasn't going to say anything about Braeden. Though, it wasn't a total lie. I *did* fall in gym today, but it wasn't enough to hurt me.

Nathan looked as if he wanted to refute my statement, but my eyes begged him not to. If he told our parents about the situation today, he would be

opening up an entire can of worms. We would have to explain the truth as to why the two of us were at odds and that was something I didn't want to do at that moment.

My brother complied with my pleas and kept his mouth shut.

"How did you fall?" Dad asked with a raised eyebrow as if he didn't believe me.

"We were playing soccer and I got tripped up with someone," I answered truthfully, "It's not a big deal."

"Did you go to the nurse?" Mom interrogated me, "Did you get ice? Ibuprofen?"

"Yes, Mom," I assured her. "I'm fine."

She didn't look convinced, but didn't say anything else. Eventually our parents let us go upstairs and for that I was grateful. Ascending the stairs elicited pain from my bruised stomach, but I paid it no mind. I just wanted to get to my room and go to sleep so I could forget about the pain in my heart. The physical pain I could handle, but the emotional pain I was experiencing was unbearable.

Nathan walked ahead of me up the stairs, seeming like he wanted to get away from me as soon as possible. I tried not to let his distant attitude bother me much.

After changing into some sweatpants, I got into bed and picked up my phone. It surprised me to see that I had three missed calls from Sam and one voicemail. I couldn't get myself to listen to his voicemail. At least not yet, anyway. What happened was still so fresh, I couldn't listen to his excuses. Not to mention, he could just be trying to mess with me some more before the game on Friday. It wouldn't surprise me.

Before I could slide the notifications away, Sam's name popped up on the screen. He was calling me again. I sat and stared down at the picture of him that came up when he called me. It was a silly picture of him at the bakery

as he was sweeping the floor, looking as if he was singing along to whatever song was playing as he did so.

Was all of that really fake? All of the good times and laughs we shared, the intimate moments, the secrets we confided in each other. Was it really all a lie? I wanted to believe it wasn't true, that it wasn't all a lie. I couldn't think about this anymore, at least not for now. The thoughts hurt too much and I couldn't tell whether my pain was coming from my bruised stomach or my broken heart.

Sam's picture vanished as the call went to voicemail once again.

Without wasting any time, or letting myself think about the consequences of my actions, I called Sam back. I didn't have time to think about what I was doing before he answered.

"Mason?" Sam answered, sounding hopeful and breathless.

The sound of his voice was enough to make me tear up again, but it also fueled my anger and I wasn't going to be able to hold back.

"You need to stop calling me," I spat furiously, "I thought I made it clear that I was done with you."

"Mase, please let me explain," he pleaded. "This is all just a misunderstanding."

"Is it?" I hissed sarcastically. "Is it just a misunderstanding that you used me to get to Nathan like you did to all those other girls? Like you did to Cindy?"

Sam was silent for a moment. All I could hear were his deep breaths before he cursed in a low tone.

"He told you," was all his said, his voice sounding strained.

"Of course he did," I answered rudely. "You think I'm going to believe that I'm any different than those girls you fucked over?"

"You *are* different," Sam tried to convince me. "Please, Mason. Please believe me."

His voice sounded sincere, but I couldn't believe him no matter how badly I wanted to. If he could use those girls just to mess with my brother, then he could do the same to me. I felt like I didn't know him anymore, like he was nothing but a stranger. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got.

" *Stop calling me* ," I seethed before hanging up.

I tossed my phone onto my bedside table and turned to stuff my face into the pillow. Slow tears rolled down my cheeks.

I wanted nothing more than for all of this to be a dream.

**

Just giving everyone a heads up that there's three more chapters in this book (plus an epilogue) and they're all LONG. The next chapter will be long, the chapter after will be even longer, and the last chapter will be LONG long.

Also, these next few weeks are going to be really busy for me. I'm working a lot and getting ready to move back to school so I'm *hoping* I'll be able to keep up with the schedule, but don't hate me if the updates come a little late. I feel like I don't have time to do anything 😩

So what did you think about the chapter? What about Nathan protecting Mason from Braeden? And Tony and Rick's reactions? What about Nathan and Mason's parents' suspicions? And Sam and Mason's phone call?

For those of you who are really missing Sam (I am too), he gets his own POV next chapter!

45

Sam Knight

Nobody in this entire fucking school could keep Mason's name out of their filthy mouths. They were tickled with joy when the news broke and Mason and I, celebrating the fact that I had done one of the only things that would unsettle Nathan Maloney. He was always so focused and poised, the ultimate competitor. But this would bother him down to his core and everyone at my school was elated.

Who cared about the people that were hurt along the way? Who cared about what this had done to Mason Maloney?

No one. No one cared about who got hurt as long as the Knights were to have a competitive advantage in the game on Friday night.

It made me sick, but I had no one to blame but myself. All I had to do was tell everyone that my relationship with Mason was real, not meant as a ploy to mess with Nathan, but I couldn't do it. All I had to do the other night was *explain* to him when he gave me the chance, but a I just stared at him like an idiot.

Insecurities I didn't even know I had crept upon me, forcing me to stay quiet and complicit while people around me treated me like a God for something I was ashamed of. I was ashamed of myself for not coming clean and trying harder to fight for Mason, but for some reason, I couldn't do it.

I trudged my feet heavily down the hallway, ignoring everyone around me as they cleared a path for me to get through. I suppressed a scoff at their actions. People were actually parting to create a path for me as if I was some powerful creature. It was pathetic and I hated everything about it.

Eventually, I made my way into the locker room where most of my team had already been waiting. I was greeted with pats on the shoulder and overly satisfied grins that I didn't return. Ignoring everyone, I made it to my

own locker and pulled the door open roughly. There was an ache in my shoulder, but I pushed the thought of it out of my mind. Jake stood beside me, not saying anything as I retrieved everything I needed for practice.

"Dude," Jake whispered, being sure no one around us could hear. "Could you at least act a little happy? Everyone's excited."

I scowled at him and answered at full volume. I didn't care if everyone heard what I had to say. Maybe they needed to hear it.

"That's your problem and everyone else's," I boomed, gesturing toward the rest of the team. "You're acting like we've already won and we haven't even played yet. With that kind of attitude, maybe we don't even deserve to win."

One thing I hated about this team was that far too many of them had egos the size of Canada. They were arrogant and didn't even try to hide it. That type of attitude would get you nowhere in life. If they thought they were already winners before stepping onto the playing field, we wouldn't stand a chance.

Of course, I wanted to win. I had spoken to a scout from UCF earlier in the day and he told me that he would be attending the game. I wanted to impress because I had something on the line. Most of the guys on the team weren't being scouted for D1 schools, so they had no idea what kind of pressure was on me for Friday night. If they weren't playing to their full potential, there was no way I would be able to play to mine.

"Everyone get out to the field," I demanded, harshly slamming my locker door shut. "We have a lot of work to do if you're all going to be acting like this."

This grabbed the attention of everyone in the locker room. They were giving me confused looks as if they couldn't believe I wasn't as excited as them.

"You think we're going to win just because Nathan Maloney might be a little bothered?" I yelled out with a scowl. "You all need a reality check if

that's the case. We need to practice and you need to stop talking about Mason."

Nobody said anything as I glanced around the room with a look of anger. I took a deep breath before my next words left my mouth.

"Because I didn't do what I did with Mason to get to Nathan," I finally admitted, causing me to be met with shocked looks from my teammates. "I was with Mason because I love him."

And with that I stormed out of the locker room and onto the field, leaving my teammates stunned in my wake.

***

Our extended practice ran later than it should have because our offense was having trouble executing a certain play. Coach and I wouldn't let anyone leave until we got it done, so the result was staying even later.

No one mentioned what had happened in the locker room prior to the start of practice. It was almost like it was an unspoken rule that we wouldn't talk about it.

By the time I got home, I was exhausted. Jonah and Mae were sitting in the living room, watching TV which told me the kids were already in bed.

"There's some dinner in the fridge for you," Mae told me in a soft voice.

She had been walking on eggshells around me ever since the whole situation with Mason occurred. Jonah, not so much, but luckily I didn't have to see much of him due to the extended football practices. He was always trying to put his nose in my business and it only got worse the last few days.

"Thanks," I mumbled briefly, heading toward the kitchen to heat up my dinner.

As I walked into the kitchen, I heard footsteps behind me and I could only assume they were Jonah's. I sighed, but didn't turn around to greet him. He would start talking whether I showed him I was listening or not.

"How was practice?" Jonah asked, leaning against the counter as I pulled my plate from the fridge and placed it in the microwave.

"Fine," I answered blandly, setting the timer on the microwave and starting it.

"Have you gotten a hold of Mason yet?" he questioned, not bothering to beat around the bush.

I sighed. "I tried calling him, he won't answer." I didn't want Jonah knowing I had gotten in another fight with Mason over the phone. He wouldn't be too pleased with me.

"Maybe you should try harder," Jonah suggested, though it sounded more like he was demanding me.

"I can't force him to answer the phone, Jonah," I spat, taking my food out of the microwave. My hand burned from the hot glass plate, but I didn't let my pain show to Jonah.

"No, but you need to do something, Samuel," Jonah replied sternly, crossing his arms over his chest. "You devastated the poor kid, you need to make things right."

"Why do you even care?" I yelled, throwing my hands in the air after setting my plate down on the counter. "It's not like you even like Mason."

"I do like him," Jonah countered. "He makes you happy."

He did make me happy and that was why I was so unhappy at that moment. Not having Mason was killing me, and I wanted to make things right with him, but that couldn't be my number one focus until after the championship game. I had to be prepared to play in front of a scout, I couldn't be letting my feelings get in the way of my shot at a D1 starting position. It was something I worked my whole life for and Friday was either going to make me or break me.

"You need to fight for him, Sam," Jonah urged me, stepping closer. "You need to *show* him that you love him, not just tell him in a voicemail."

With that, Jonah walked away and left me alone with only my dinner for company.

Showing Mason how much I loved him would have to wait. Just a few more days and I would show him and show him and keep showing him until he got the message.

***

The last thing I expected to happen when I was taking a walk later that night to clear my head was running into Nathan Maloney. Literally running into him.

"Sorry–" he started before he glanced up at me. His expression immediately turned to one of disgust and pure hatred. His eyes were black with rage as if he was ready to tear me limb from limb.

Before I could say anything to convince him to walk away, I was on the ground with the wind knocked out of me, Nathan having tackled me.

"Nathan, stop." I commanded as I looked up at his red face. "I don't want to fight with you right now."

He let out an angry laugh that felt as though it could've stabbed me with its force.

"You messed with my brother, you don't get
to decide when we fight," he spat, shoving me back down as I tried to get up.

His anger soon rubbed off on me, although I knew I deserved for him to be angry at me.

I quickly got up to my feet before Nathan could push me down again. I grabbed Nathan's shoulders and shoved him up against a nearby tree.

"You told him about Cindy," I seethed, feeling the heat of my anger rise to my cheeks.

"Of course, I did," he replied, roughly shoving me away from him.

I hated the stupid look on his face. It was enough for me to want to punch him. Before I could think any further, Nathan's fist landed on my face with force.

I stumbled backward, my hand clutching my cheek. I sent him an evil scowl before I ran toward him, sending him flying toward the ground. My hands grabbed onto Nathan's wrists to keep him from hitting me again.

"Nathan, stop!" I shouted as he tried to wiggle out of my grasp. "Do you really want to beat the shit out of me?"

"Yes!" Nathan exclaimed.

"No, you don't," I told him. "Because if you do, neither of us will be able to play. You'll be suspended."

That was enough to calm him down, but his face didn't soften one bit.

"I don't care," he said.

"Yes, you do," I responded.

Although Nathan and I hated each other, there was no one I'd rather play against for the state championship. When I played against him, I played my best.

Nathan just stared up at me for a few moments, not saying anything. He forcefully brought his knee up to my stomach, knocking the wind out of me again and causing me to roll off of him.

Nathan stood up and looked down at me on the ground as I clutched my stomach.

"Fine, I'll beat you in the championship and then I'll beat the shit out of you," he hissed, sending me one last nasty glare before walking away.

After the pain subsided in my stomach, I let out a sigh and stared up at the stars and couldn't stop myself from thinking Nathan was going to give me what I deserved.

***

Mason Maloney

"You two obviously have some things to talk through, so we're going out," Mom announced Thursday evening.

Nathan had just gotten out of practice and was sitting downstairs, watching TV with Dad while I had the day off from work and used it to sulk in my room. Soon after Nathan got home, my mother forced me out of my room and sat me down on the couch.

"If you're not going to tell us whatever is going on with you two, then you're going to at least sit here and talk through it together," Dad said, getting up from the couch to stand beside Mom.

"You two are not to leave this room," Mom told us sternly, pointing a finger at us. "We *will* find out if you've talked it out. The tension between you guys is too obvious to ignore."

"We'll be back later," Dad stated, pulling his coat on. "You two better talk or next thing we'll do is lock you in a room until you make up."

With that, our parents left us. Nathan didn't say anything until our parents had pulled out of the driveway, leaving us truly alone.

"I have nothing to say," was all he said, staring straight ahead at the TV.

I scoffed, "Of course, you don't."

My stomach was still sore from the beating it had gotten the other day, so I tried not to move too much. I shifted my position to get some pressure off

of my stomach and hissed in pain at the action. Nathan gave me a brief worried look before turning his expression blank again.

"Did you ever put ice on that?" he asked me, turning the volume down on the TV.

I shook my head. "I forgot."

"Idiot," Nathan muttered.

"Listen, Nate," I started, turning toward him and ignoring the pain I felt. "You know I didn't get with Sam to mess with you, right? You know, on my end at least, it had nothing to do with you?"

I needed him to know that. Part of me felt as thought Nathan had this irrational anger at me because he thought that I had done this to hurt him.

Nathan sighed and shut the TV off, turning his body to face me.

"Yeah, I know," he said sullenly.

"Then why can't you forgive me?" I questioned, putting some force behind my words.

Nathan didn't say anything. He stared blankly at me as if he was gathering his thoughts. He no longer looked angry, but he wasn't pleased either.

"It's not that I don't forgive you," Nathan stared, clearing his throat, "It's more frustration that you didn't listen to me. You never do."

"I didn't listen to you because you're usually not right," I answered back rudely. I hated that he thought he could dictate my decisions.

Nathan rolled his eyes at me. "But I was right about this, wasn't I?"

I didn't answer because he was right, and I didn't want to admit that. Nathan took my silence as confirmation and gave me a smug look in return.

"That's what I thought," he said boastfully. "I warned you and you still went ahead and trusted him anyway. You got yourself hurt even after I *warned* you."

He was right and I hated it. I wanted nothing more than to be able to tell him he was wrong, that what Sam and I had was real, but I couldn't because Nathan was right. The thought of Sam and what happened caused a rush of emotions to come back to me. My throat closed up and there was nothing I could do to stop the tears from coming.

"Hey," Nathan said, sliding over on the couch to be next to me. "Stop it. Don't cry."

His words did nothing to soothe me and the waterworks continued. I thought I had cried out all of my tears earlier in the week, but I was wrong. I was wrong about a lot apparently.

"I loved him," I sobbed, putting my face in my hands. I felt Nathan's arms wrap around me, pulling me closer to him. He used his hand to place my head in his chest as he held me while I cried.

Nathan soothingly rubbed my back as I sobbed into his chest. I wanted to be done crying about this, but it still hurt *so bad* . The bent and awkward position I was in did my injured stomach no favors. I groaned out in pain and Nathan moved us so that I was sitting up without pulling away from me.

"I'm so stupid," I wailed pathetically.

"You're not stupid," Nathan murmured, continuing to rub circles on my back.

I picked my head up to look at him through swollen eyes.

"I am," I told him, "You even said it."

"I guess love just makes people do stupid things, not that I would know," Nathan replied softly. "But you're not stupid. I only said that because I was

mad at you."

"I hate this," I cried, "I just want to go back to before I even met him. God, I'm *so stupid* ."

Nathan quickly shook his head. "He's the stupid one for doing this to you. You deserve someone great, and he's not it."

But I wanted him to be it. I wanted Sam to be the one I spent forever with. I was in love with him, and that wasn't going to just go away.

Before either of us could say anything else, there was a knock on the front door. Nathan and I shared matching looks of confusion before another knock sounded. Nathan unwrapped his arms from around me and got up from the couch to get the door.

"Get out of here," I heard him say angrily.

My heart stopped in my chest. What if it was Sam? Before I could stop myself, I bolted toward the door. In inexplicable feeling of disappointment pooled in my chest when I got to the door and came face to face with Christo and Jake.

"There he is, let us talk to him," Jake commanded, not too kindly.

Nathan didn't even turn to face me. "Not happening."

My brother grabbed Jake by the shirt and started shoving him outside. The look on Jake's face was filled with hatred. Before Jake started retaliating, I spoke up.

"Nate, wait," I said, causing my brother to turn to me with a disapproving look. "Let them in."

I didn't know why, but I wanted to hear what they had to say. Christo and Jake wouldn't just come here for no reason and I doubted they would even some here just to mess with me.

Although Nathan very obviously disapproved, he let go of Jake then stepped aside and let the two Knights into our home. I led the three of them back into the living room and sat down on the couch. Nathan sat beside me while Christo and Jake took a seat on the two-seater couch beside us.

"What do you have to say?" I asked timidly, wiping my face to rid myself of any remaining tears. Christo was the first to speak up.

"Sam's a mess," he said, eliciting a scoff from Nathan. I smacked his shoulder in a warning for him to stop. "He's angry at everyone, he won't talk to us."

"What does this have to do with me?" I questioned the boys, causing Jake to dramatically roll his eyes at me.

"It has everything to do with you, dipshit," Jake answered rudely. Nathan leaned forward toward Jake with a glare masking his face.

"What went down the other day," Christo continued, "was a complete misunderstanding."

I stayed silent, waiting for one of them to continue.

"I'm just going to come out and say it," Jake started, "I was the one that put the pictures online."

I scoffed, crossed my arms over my chest. "There's a shock," I said, sarcasm dripping from my tone.

Jake ignored my comment and continued, "I found the pictures on his phone and just assumed he was going to use them to get to Nathan before the game. He didn't know I posted them until after they were up."

I stayed silent, urging him to go on.

"When he first met you, I suggested doing that, but he was against it," Jake explained further, "So when I saw the pictures I thought there was a chance he wouldn't go through with it, so I sent them out without him knowing."

What he was saying wasn't doing anything to make me feel any better, but still, I wanted him to finish explaining.

Christo took over, "When he found out that the pictures were out, he was kinda shocked and didn't say much, and I was confused because I thought your relationship was real so I was mad that he lied."

"But he didn't lie to you, Mason," Jake finished for Christo. "Owen and I were making fun of you when we were talking about the pictures and Sam said it made him feel like he couldn't come out to us, so he just let us think what we wanted to."

I was confused beyond belief. That sounded out of character for Sam. He was always so self-assured and confident. Not to mention, he was willing to come out to be with me after the football season was over.

"Then he got pissed at everyone after you left the other night and came clean about it. He even came out to the rest of the team today," Christo told me.

Still, I said nothing, trying to process the information that was just shared with me.

"What about the girls he used to get to Nathan before?" I finally spoke up. "How am I any different than them?"

Jake glared at my brother as if he was angry at him for telling me about Sam's past.

"That was two years ago," Christo reasoned. "He's changed since then and he feels bad about what went down with Cindy."

Nathan scoffed. "That's bullshit. He was still sleeping with our cheerleaders at the beginning of this year."

"You only found out about that because of me. I sent you those messages," Jake admitted with a hard stare. "It was only two girls and it wasn't to get to you."

Jake's admittance only confused me more.

"Then what the hell was it for?" Nathan asked incredulously.

Jake shrugged. "He slept around a lot during the summer and at the beginning of the year. My guess is he figured out his sexuality and was trying to suppress it."

Nathan and I stayed silent in response to his words. Jake was a liar if I had ever known one, but was it possible he was telling the truth about this?

"So there," Jake started, standing up from the couch, "It's my fault this happened and Sam's miserable, and makes everyone else miserable, without you around, so make up with him."

Jake turned and left the living room without another word. Christo stood up and looked at me sympathetically.

"I'm sorry this happened," Christo apologized, looking down at the floor and then looking bad at me.

I just nodded in acknowledgement and then Christo turned and left to follow Jake out the door. Nathan and I were silent for a few moments before he spoke up.

"Do you believe them?" he asked.

I let out a deep breath. I didn't know what to think. I wanted so badly to believe them, but part of me was still wary. Like Nathan said, Sam had a track record for this sort of thing. They could just be trying to get to me one last time before the game. I didn't want to leave myself vulnerable for more heartbreak, so I was apprehensive to trust Jake and Christo's words.

Not to mention, if this was true, then it meant Sam was complicit in me getting outted to our entire community and that didn't sit well with me.

"I don't know," I admitted with a sigh. "I want to."

"Of course, you want to," Nathan said softly, moving closer to me on the couch. "That's understandable."

"Do you think I should?" I asked him, though I didn't know why I was. There was no way he wanted me to get back with Sam, even if this was one big misunderstanding.

Nathan took a deep breath and let out a sigh before shrugging his shoulders.

"You know I was going to tell you about Sam and me, right?" I asked him. "After football season I was going to talk to you. Sam and I thought it would be best to wait, so no one got distracted by it."

I needed him to know that I was eventually going to come clean to him, that was the only way I could show him how serious I was about Sam. This way, he would hopefully give me his honest opinion about whether I should believe Jake and Christo.

"I understand why you didn't want me to know at first," Nathan agreed with a nod. "It makes sense. You know me better than I know myself. You knew how I would react to it during the season and I proved you right."

I let out a small laugh. "You did."

Nathan chuckled before letting out a groan, throwing his head back.

"I still don't like him, even if what they said is true, which I find hard to believe considering what he's done in the past," Nathan confessed, giving me a knowing look. "Not to mention, if what they said is true, he just let you deal with being thrown out of the closet by yourself."

I hadn't even had the chance to think about that. Sam was too scared to come out, even though I had to deal with being scrutinized by everyone I passed, but we all had insecurities. Sam was no different and he had to deal with my insecurities throughout our whole relationship.

"I know," I replied.

I couldn't expect him to just magically start liking Sam. Sam was responsible for breaking up Nathan's only serious relationship. If everything ended up working out, I knew the process of getting them to be civil would be long.

"I think you should think on it until after the game tomorrow," Nathan finally said, "Just to be safe. There's no reason to keep messing with you if football is over."

I couldn't help but agree with my brother. I would talk to Sam after the game. I tried not to let myself get too hopeful, but I would be lying if I said I didn't get butterflies thinking about making up with Sam.

"Yeah, you're right," I agreed with a nod. "So are we good now? Are you going to stop hating me?"

Nathan smiled. "I never hated you, I could never."

I rolled my eyes playfully. "Thanks for saving me from Braeden the other day, by the way."

Nathan just shrugged. "You're my brother, no matter how mad you make me, I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. I have half a mind to go beat the shit out of Knight."

I raised my eyebrows in a stern look. "Don't."

"Your boy toy is safe for now, don't worry," Nathan replied sarcastically, "but if he hurts you again, I won't be so forgiving."

Nathan and I finished the night watching TV together.

I couldn't help but think about the possibility of Jake and Christo's confession to be true. What they said made sense and it wasn't too far fetched, but I was still nervous that I wouldn't be able to trust anything they said, no matter how genuine they looked. Not to mention, Sam wasn't even able to tell me that himself.

My pain was replaced with nervousness, but I would be lying if I said that the latter wasn't infinitely better than the former.

**

Happy Friday! I wrote a bit of this chapter on the bike at the gym on my phone listening to Formation by Beyoncé so there may be more mistakes than usual

So what did you think of the chapter? How do you feel about Sam admitting he loves Mason to his team? What do you think about Nathan going after him? And what about Nathan and Mason's talk? AND Jake and Christo?

Thanks for reading!

Also, stream Lover by Taylor Swift.

46

Mason Maloney

When the Warriors made it to the championship game last year, people were undoubtedly excited. However, when they lost, no one was pleased. This year was insanely more exciting considering the Warriors would be playing the Knights. No one even tried to hide their eagerness.

Even the administrators at our school were elated, scheduling a pep rally during the last period of the day to get everyone more hyped up than they already were and encourage everyone in the student body to attend the game.

I glanced at my brother who was down on the gym floor with his team, wearing his football jersey and a wide grin. It was nice to see him look so at ease, especially before a game as big as this one.

Since the game was later tonight, people seemed to forget about my scandal and left me alone. They wanted to amp up the team so that what I did wouldn't affect them negatively.

"Are we all riding together tonight?" Bella yelled to me over the music.

I shrugged and yelled back, "I guess so."

There was no use in trying to take separate cars considering the amount of people that would be attending the game. Finding parking was going to be a nightmare. Our school was even providing fan buses to take some of our students to the game to try and make parking more available.

I didn't pay attention as our principal began speaking at the podium in the center of the gym. He was speaking enthusiastically, causing cheers to erupt around me, but his words went over my head. The only reason I was here

was for Nathan, any other time I could get out of my history class, I would want to leave the school.

Our principal introduced the cheerleaders and they went on to do an elaborate routine on the mats on top of the gym floor. At the end of their routine, each cheerleader had a sign for each football player and stepped graciously to their designated player to hand them a gift bag. I glanced at Sabrina, the head cheerleader assigned to my brother, and noticed the way she traced her hand up and down Nathan's arm. I wondered if Sam was getting similar treatment today.

Nathan casually put his arm around Sabrina as the team and the squad gathered around each other, the football players yelling loud words of encouragement. I wondered if Nathan and Sabrina had ever been involved. Nathan wasn't one to date much after things ended badly with Cindy, I really wasn't either, so I had never seen him with a girl for more than a few months at a time.

Thankfully, the pep rally ended soon after and I was able to leave with my friends. Ross, Liza, Bella, and Pete were all going to come to my house before the game and there I would tell them about what Jake and Christo came to tell me the night before.

"What do you got for food?" Pete asked as soon as we stepped into my house, heading into the kitchen presumably to raid my fridge and cabinets.

"No idea," I replied, plopping myself down on the couch, being mindful of my injured stomach.

Once Pete arrived in the living room, munching on chips with the bag in his hand, I explained the situation to my friends. Bella and Pete had distrustful looks on their faces while Ross and Liza looked more hopeful.

"It's just weird," Bella spoke up. "If it's true and if it's not, both situations are weird."

"I know," I agreed.

"So you're going to talk to him after the game?" Pete wondered warily.

"Well, probably not right after," I told him, "If he wins or loses, either way he probably won't want to talk to me then."

My friends all nodded in understanding and the discussion about Sam ended after that. Bella and Liza were getting along surprisingly well. Bella tended to get jealous of other girls easily and I guessed that was why her closest friends were all guys, but luckily she was playing nice, at least for now.

The two girls left to the bathroom a little while later to start getting ready for the game. Apparently they had to "look cute" because it was the championship and there would be lots of pictures being taken all around. I didn't understand why that mattered, but I didn't argue with them.

"I can't believe Bella is willingly hanging out with her," Pete chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief. I couldn't believe he hadn't stolen the alcohol out of my room yet, but I wouldn't bring that up to him.

"She's full of surprises," Ross joked, looking over to me. I nodded in agreement with a smile of my own, taking a sip of my glass of water.

"Do you think I should ask her out?" Pete asked suddenly.

I choked in response to his words, Ross quick to smack my back with a wildly shocked look of his own. I continued to cough and slap my own chest, my whole body hurting from my movements. When I looked to Pete, he held a serious expression as if he was still waiting for an answer.

Was he serious?

"Are you serious?" I rasped out once my coughs subsided.

Pete just nodded, his expression never changing.

"Since when do you like Bella?" Ross whispered, looking around to make sure she was still out of the room.

Pete shrugged. "Probably since I kissed her."

"You *what* ?" I screeched, causing Ross to smack his hand over my mouth.

The corners of Pete's mouth turned into a smug smirk as he let out a snicker at my reaction to his words.

To say I was shocked was an understatement. The two of them had always bickered like siblings. Did this mean that was all actually just unresolved sexual tension? I didn't want to think about it.

"When the hell did that happen?" Ross wondered, removing his hand from my mouth. His voice was calmer than mine, but he was just as stunned.

"Few weeks ago?" Pete guessed. "Before her date with that Tinder guy."

Pete paused for a moment then smirked, "And after that too."

"You kissed her twice?" I hissed quietly.

"She kissed me the second time," he admitted.

"Holy shit," I breathed out, looking to Ross as I placed my hand on my forehead. We shared a look mixed with shock and confusion before turning back to Pete.

"Pete," Ross started, "You can't mess with her, dude. She's our friend. That's not cool."

Pete scoffed, painting an offended look on his face and crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back in his seat.

"I'm not messing with her," he retorted. "I'm being serious." He emphasized his words as if trying to prove it to us.

"You know how she is," I began, "She's sensitive. You can't get with her if you're just going to hurt her in the end."

Although Bella could annoy me like no one else, I still cared for her. If Pete was just going to use her for a few weeks and drop her, then there was going to be a problem amongst us all as friends.

Pete let out a breath and shook his head. "You guys have no faith in me."

"We're just saying," Ross defended. "But if you're really into her, then... go for it? I guess." Ross looked to me for confirmation. I sighed and nodded in agreement.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Pete responded sarcastically to my look of apprehension.

"You can't blame me," I fought back. "It's weird as hell. It's going to take some time getting used to."

"Just like you being with Sam?" Pete shot at me, raising his eyebrows in question.

"He got you there," Ross teased, nudging my aching ribs with his elbow.

I narrowed my eyes at both of them. "Fine."

Our conversation ceased there because Bella and Liza came storming into the living room, dressed head to toe in our school colors, finished off with dots of face paint.

"Who's going to let us paint their face?" Bella asked excitedly, pointing to her own decorated face.

"Hell no," Pete instantly replied. "You look ridiculous."

Bella glared at him before sticking up her middle finger and turning to me.

"Mase?" she asked, voice full of hope.

I shook my head. "No."

She huffed and went to sit beside Pete on the two-seater couch. I paid attention to their interaction with a quizzical look. Nothing seemed to have changed between the two of them, but now that I knew there was more going on with them than either of them let on, I would view how they acted in a different way than I usually did.

Liza somehow convinced Ross to let her put two red lines of paint under his eyes, causing Bella to give Pete her best puppy dog eyes. He shook his head at her, but she continued to stare at him with her bottom lip jutted out in a pout. Pete's expression remained hard for a few more seconds before he let out a sigh and gave in, eliciting a squeal from Bella. She painted the lines under his eyes while Pete sat there with a scowl on his face. I chuckled at their situation but didn't say anything.

Within the next few minutes, the five of us were piling into Ross's car, Pete snagging the passenger's seat from Liza, much to the dismay of Ross.

"The smallest ones have to sit in the back," was what Pete said to defend his actions.

I crammed myself into the backseat with the two girls, struggling to find the buckle for my seat belt.

"Bell, you're sitting on my buckle," I complained, trying to push her off.

She turned an pinched me. "No, I'm not!"

"Don't pinch me!" I shot back, pinching the skin on her arm. She was, by the way, sitting on my buckle.

"Kids!" Pete exclaimed, turning around in his seat. "We will turn this car around if you don't behave."

We each sent him a deadpanned look while he just chuckled at his lame attempt of a joke.

Soon enough, we made it to the championship game. It was being held at a larger field in neutral territory so neither team had the advantage of their own field. Finding parking was a nightmare, but Ross was eventually able to pull his car in somewhere and the five of us got out to find seats.

I shivered, pulling my jacket closer to my body, as we sat down on the icy bleachers. Being a December night in Massachusetts, the temperature was expected to get into the low teens tonight. It would be hard to stay and sit

through the cold, but we would all do it for this game that we had been waiting for since last season.

I spotted Sam's family almost instantly when I looked across the field at the Knight side. Little Lila was bundled up in a warm winter coat and a purple Knights Football beanie on top of her head. Her cheeks were rosy, but she looked happy as she munched on a pretzel. Miles sat beside her, one of his friends on his other side.

I swore I made eye contact with Jonah as he looked across the field while he was mid conversation with Mae, but I quickly averted my eyes. I was still so embarrassed that they had seen me freak out the other night.

"Mase," Bella tapped me on the shoulder, "Come with me to get something to eat before the game starts."

I sighed, but complied anyway. Bella led me down the bleachers quickly. I almost missed a step, but quickly caught myself and continued to follow Bella as she pushed through everyone in her way. The concession line wasn't as long as I had expected it would be, but I came face to face with Jonah Knight when we got there. I tried to hide my face, but he saw me. There was no way he didn't see me.

"Hi, Mason," he greeted me. I nodded at him in acknowledgement while Bella looked at him with a confused expression. "I hope you're doing alright," Jonah added kindly.

I nodded, giving him a closed lip smile. "I'm doing fine, thanks."

Bella went ahead to order her food, leaving me alone with Jonah.

"Sam said something to me the other day and it's been bothering me," Jonah started again. My heart jumped at the mention of Sam.

"Hm?" I hummed, looking down at the ground and then back up at Jonah.

"He said that it seemed like I didn't like you," Jonah explained, "I just wanted you to know that's not true and I'm sorry if I ever made it seem that

way."

I was surprised to hear this, but pleased nonetheless.

"It's okay," I assured him with a grin.

Jonah just nodded before stepping forward to the concession stand. He definitely wasn't much of a conversationalist, but I would be lying if I said it didn't warm my heart to know that he liked me. It seemed like Jonah didn't like many people.

"Who was that?" Bella asked, taking a bite of her hot dog as the two of us made our way back to our seats.

"Sam's older brother," I told her.

"Oh shit," Bella gaped. "What did he want?"

I just shrugged. "It was nothing."

By the time we got back to our seats, the bleachers were shaking, almost making me lose my footing. The coin toss was about to happen, the captains of each team at the center of the field. I paid close attention to the interaction between Sam and Nathan. Both were standing stiffly, avoiding eye contact with the other. They shook each other's hand briefly, pulling their hands away almost as quickly as they touched.

The referee tossed the coin and it landed on heads, meaning the Knights got to decide what they wanted to do with the ball. Sam decided to receive the ball in the second half before Nathan lazily pointed to the left side of the field to pick their end zone and made his way back to his bench for a quick huddle with his team before the kickoff.

When Nathan got onto the field, I could tell how focused he was from where I sat. He didn't let the noise from either side to get to him. He kept his eyes on the field and advanced forward. The crowd on our side of the field erupted into cheers when his first pass was completed for a first down.

Nathan quickly got his offense down the field and soon enough, they were first and goal. His first pass was too high, incomplete.

"Come on, Nate," I said under my breath.

The next play, Nathan decided to run the ball and forced himself into the end zone, resulting in a touchdown. Everyone on our side stood up and cheered, including myself. I didn't let the dull throb of my stomach bother me as I jumped up from my seat and cheered for my brother.

After the extra point was kicked, the Knights offense made it out onto the field, Sam leading them. Sam's opening drive was similar to Nathan's. He was confident and focused, advancing his team toward their end zone. He was also able to score on his first drive, leaving the game tied.

For the entire first half, the Knights and the Warriors were pretty evenly matched, the score staying tied. It wasn't until there was about a minute before half time, when Sam was on the field, that things turned for the worst.

The ball was snapped into Sam's hands and he moved quickly on his feet, looking for his players who ran their route. He threw the ball when he found an opening and seconds later, he was hit up high. The force caused him to smack the ground with a hard thud that could be heard from where I was sitting. Gasps were heard from both sides, everyone standing to get a look at the action.

A flag was thrown on the play. Roughing the passer. Fifteen yards and an automatic first down.

A little bit of pushing and shoving happened between the Knights and the Warriors, but the referees quickly put that to a stop.

I watched as Sam curled up, cradling his shoulder on the ground. His trainers and team doctor ran out onto the field and my whole face paled. I stood, shocked, as they knelt down beside Sam on the ground. My heart stopped, vowing not to move again until I knew he was okay. I felt Bella

grasp my arm as we both watched and waited for Sam to get up. He just needed to *get up* .

Eventually, he was helped up, still cradling his shoulder. The crowds on both sides clapped for him as he stood. My heart started beating again when I saw that he was able to stand on his own. He walked off the field and toward the locker rooms. I knew that couldn't mean anything good. The back up quarterback made his way onto the field, looking obviously distressed at the situation. He was some sophomore that probably never expected to *actually* have to play.

"Do you think he's alright?" Bella asked me as we sat back down.

"I don't know," I replied. "I don't know. I want to go check on him."

Ross gave me a sympathetic look. "Maybe you should wait."

He was right, but I was still stressed. I didn't like seeing him lie on the field like that, I didn't like it at all. Even though he was able to walk on his own to the locker room, I still had an uncomfortable feeling in my chest.

The clock ran out for the half and both teams made their way to their locker rooms for the intermission while the cheerleaders geared up for their half time performances.

Without saying anything to my friends, I descended the bleachers and ignored their voices asking me where I was going. I scurried to the other side of the field to find Sam's family. Luckily, Mae was still sitting on the bleachers with the kids when I got there.

"Is Jonah with Sam?" I asked Mae without a greeting.

She nodded. "He's going to see if he needs to go to the hospital."

The look on my face must have been mortified because Mae looked at me with sympathy, gesturing for me to sit beside her. Lila looked so worried, she wasn't being her normal bubbly self.

"Jonah is going to let me know what's going on," Mae assured me, placing her hand on my arm, "I'm sure he's okay."

I nodded, but didn't say anything else.

Not soon enough, Jonah returned with a hard look on his face. Mae and I both looked at him with expectant looks, waiting for him to tell us what was going on. He didn't even question me being there before he started talking.

"His stubborn ass doesn't want to go to the hospital," Jonah announced, taking a seat beside Mae.

"Is he okay?" I asked, worry filling my tone.

"He dislocated his shoulder, the doctor popped it back in, but he still wants him to go to the hospital," Jonah explained. "He wants to go after the game."

"Does he need to go right away?" Mae asked curiously. "Could it hurt him if he doesn't go right now?"

Jonah shrugged. "He could tear stuff in his shoulder, but he seems to think it's fine. I think he's an idiot, but I can't force him."

"I'll go talk to him," I offered, standing up from my seat.

Jonah and Mae each gave me looks of concern.

"Are you sure?" Jonah asked.

I nodded. "It's worth a shot, he should probably go get his shoulder checked."

"He'll probably listen to you," Jonah agreed.

Half time was almost over by the time I made my way toward the locker rooms. I waited outside for the players to start coming out so I could catch Sam before he went to watch the rest of the game. The Warriors started exiting their locker room first. Nathan quirked a brow when he saw me, but

he didn't stop to talk, not that I expected him to. He was in game mode and he wasn't going to let anything take him away from that.

A few moments later, the Knights started coming out from their locker room. Sam was one of the first and stopped short when he saw me. He had changed out of his gear and his arm was stuck in a sling. His mouth was parted and he breathed heavy as he stared at me.

"Can we talk?" I asked, raising my eyebrows in question.

"Yeah," Sam answered instantly. "Now?" I nodded.

Jake glanced in our direction with an unreadable look as he walked by. When Christo saw us, he had a different reaction. He smirked at the two of us, letting out a suggestive whistle to which I rolled my eyes. The rest of the team didn't pay us much attention, though some did spare us indecipherable glances.

"You wanted to talk?" Sam asked once everyone had left us alone. I brought my eyes back to him and nodded.

"You need to go to the hospital," I told him sternly, crossing my arms over my chest.

Sam rolled his eyes defiantly. "Nothing is going to change about my condition from now to an hour from now, it's fine."

"Aren't you worried about doing more damage to your shoulder?" I asked him seriously. "You need that to play football, you know."

Sam let out a humorless laugh. "I'm not going to be playing football anymore anyway. The scout from UCF is here and he saw me get injured. He'll never want me to sign now."

I let out a sigh, trying to give him a comforting expression, but probably failing.

"You don't know that," I tried to console him.

"No scout would sign an injured player to a D1 starting position," he replied with a sad smile. "It's just not going to happen for me."

"It's not like it's a major injury though, right?" I added. "A dislocated shoulder can be an easy fix."

"He doesn't know that's all it is though," Sam answered sullenly. "And he probably won't seek me out to find out."

"Then you seek *him* out," I encouraged, looking straight into his eyes. "Show him that you have what it takes and that you're not giving up."

Sam seemed to ponder on what I said for a few minutes, nodding his head lightly.

"Show him," Sam repeated.

I smiled. "Actions speak volumes."

"Yeah, you're right," Sam agreed with a nod. "Will you wait for me while I go find him? I have to show you something after."

I gave him a confused look, quirking my head to the side. "Sure."

Sam smiled widely at me before turning on his heal and heading out toward the field to find the UCF scout.

I left the locker room area and headed back toward my seat where my friends sat. The game had already started back up again, but my friends' eyes were only on me as I ascended the steps.

"Did you talk to Sam?" Ross asked as I retook my seat.

I nodded. "I talked to him."

"And?" he asked. All eyes were on me, waiting for my answer.

"Dislocated shoulder," I said, looking straight out onto the field just in time to see Nathan jogging his way to the twenty-five yard line.

"That's it?" Pete asked confusedly. "You didn't talk about your relationship?"

"I was more worried about his well-being," I told him with a glare to which he held up his hands in mock surrender.

Nathan and the Warriors dominated the rest of the game. Sam's back up quarterback was nowhere near the same level as him, though he wasn't *that* bad. He just wasn't good enough compared to Nathan, whereas Sam and Nathan were more evenly matched.

In the last few minutes of the game, I finally made eye contact with Sam from the other side of the field. He was talking with an older man I didn't recognize on the sidelines behind his team's bench. When he saw me, he had a huge smile on his face, despite the fact that his team was about to lose the championship to their ultimate rivals. I could only assume that meant there was good news about his future in football.

The bleachers moved and rocked as the clock wound down and the Warriors became state champions. As soon as the clock hit zero, the bleachers cleared as everyone on our side made it down to the field. The Warriors were at the center of the field, huddled together. I walked behind the crowd to get down to the field and was met with a grinning Sam.

I gave him a skeptical look. "Why are you so happy?"

"I talked to the UCF scout," Sam told me without elaborating.

My eyes widened. "And?"

"I'm signing tomorrow," he finished with a cheeky grin.

A smile broke out onto my face and I wanted nothing more than to be able to jump into his arms and squeeze him in a hug. I couldn't do that, not only because of his injured shoulder, but because I didn't know where we stood in our relationship. I wanted to see if Christo and Jake's story held up and if Sam would even want me back after I jumped to conclusions without letting him explain anything.

"That's great," I settled on saying. "I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks," Sam said, looking down at me with a soft expression. "Come on," he said, holding his hand out for me to take.

"What?" I asked confusedly. Sam rolled his eyes and grabbed my hand in his.

"I have to go talk to your brother," Sam explained, albeit blandly.

"Why?" I questioned with a shocked expression. "Sam, I don't know if that's a good idea."

Sam didn't listen as he dragged me through the crowd by my hand. He paid no mind to the stares we were getting, but I saw them all.

Eventually, we made it to where Nathan was standing with a few of his teammates, including Tony and Rick. They were all grinning and there was some confetti stuck in Nathan's hair. His grin faltered briefly when he saw Sam and I, but he didn't let it completely leave his face.

When we reached my brother, Sam let go of my hand and I looked at him anxiously, wondering what he was going to do. Sam and Nathan stared straight ahead at each other for a few moments before Sam stuck his hand out, waiting for Nathan to shake it.

"Good game," Sam said, "Congratulations."

Nathan appeared to be stunned for a few moments but was quickly able to switch back to his confident self. Much to my surprise, he actually latched onto Sam's hand and gave it a firm shake. When Sam was going to pull away, Nathan held on tighter and pulled him closer.

"If you ever hurt my brother, I'll kill you," Nathan threatened seriously.

My eyes widened in horror, "Nath—"

"I won't," Sam assured him, breaking eye contact with Nathan to look at me as if being sure I got the message as well. "I want you both to know what

happened was all a huge misunderstanding."

Nathan and Sam finally let go of each other's hands. Tony and Rick looked as if they were both immensely interested in the conversation about to take place.

"Jake put the pictures out," Sam continued, "and I didn't know about it until afterward."

That was all I needed to hear. He sounded so genuine and I could tell just by looking in his eyes that what happened hurt him too.

"We know," I cut him off, placing my hand on his shoulder. He quirked his eyebrow at me confusedly. "Jake and Christo came to our house last night and explained."

"They did?" Sam wondered, looking stunned as if he didn't believe his friends would do that.

I nodded. "I didn't know what to believe, but I know now."

Sam smiled at me softly, looking relieved at my words.

"I'm so sorry, Mase," Sam started with an apologetic look, "I should have told him right away that he was wrong and I shouldn't have let you deal with being outed alone. I should have fought harder for you."

I shook my head. "I was so upset. I know I should have let you explain, but I was *so* upset."

Sam gave me an understanding look. "I know."

"So," Nathan interjected, causing the two of us to look at him. "Now that that's cleared up, you two can stop the blame game on yourselves and get back together."

To say I was shocked at my brother's words was an understatement. He looked serious, no joking expression on his face. Never in my life had I

ever expected Nathan to be encouraging me to go out with Sam Knight, but here we were.

Instead of saying anything to me, Sam kept his eyes on Nathan.

"I want a truce," Sam started, surprising me, but not Nathan. "I want to stop hating each other, for him." Sam pointed at me.

Nathan paused for a few moments before nodding. "Fine."

"And I'm sorry for what happened with Cindy," Sam apologized sincerely.

Nathan looked surprised, but didn't let it show for too long before he shrugged and placed a casual expression back on his face.

"If she was willing to cheat on me with you, she was probably willing to cheat on me with anyone," Nathan started, "It doesn't matter anymore."

"And I'm sorry for writing those homophobic things about you earlier in the year," Nathan continued. "That wasn't cool."

Sam nodded. "Truce."

Nathan nodded back. "Truce."

That was all that needed to be said for Sam and I to both break out into a smile. Sam turned to face me, coming closer. His eyes focused on my lips, but he made no move for them.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked in a whisper.

I couldn't even be bothered to answer verbally. I placed my hand on the back of his neck and pulled him to me, our lips meeting in the middle. This kiss felt different than all our others. This one held more passion, emotion, relief, hope, *love* . His lips felt like they were meant to be on mine forever, like he was the only one for me. I heard whistles around us, which I could only assume was Christo and my assumption was confirmed when I heard him ask Tony if the two of us were back together.

Sam and I pulled away, breathless and flushed as we stared into each other's eyes. He had a stupid grin on his face that I was sure I mirrored.

"I love you," Sam confessed, still breathless. My own breath caught in my throat at his words, staring straight into his eyes to try and detect if he was telling the truth. There was nothing but honesty being radiated off of him.

"I love you too," I replied, causing Sam's grin to widen up to his eyes.

Christo cheered and clapped his hands, startling me. He came over and stood between us, throwing his arms around each of our shoulders.

"Thank *God* my best gays are back together," Christo said in an exaggerated tone. Sam glared at him and ducked under his arm.

I chuckled as Christo kept his arm around me, sending Sam an offended look.

"Fine," Christo said, "Be like that."

Sam just shook his head and grabbed my hand to pull me away from Christo.

"Let me introduce you to my team," Sam suggested, pulling me along.

My eyes widened and I stopped in my tracks. "I really don't think that's a good idea."

"Mase, please," Sam pleaded with wide eyes. "Let me make this up to you, let me show you how much you mean to me."

It was the look on his face that caused me to give in. The look of hope and sorrow melted my insides and dragged my body closer to his, following him toward his team without a second thought.

The team was heading back toward the locker room, their heads hung low in disappointment. Some even looked angry, like they were ready to punch something. I just hoped their anger wouldn't transfer to me.

"Hey!" Sam stooped the group. They turned to face us, looks of confusion and disbelief littered their faces.

We stopped in front of them and I was sure my face held a look of bewilderment as many of Sam's teammates looked down at our intertwined hands.

"I want you all to properly meet Mason," Sam continued when he had their attention. He seemed to be the one guy on their team that everyone listened to. "I lov–"

"Sam," I hissed, slapping his uninjured shoulder.

While I understood the sentiment behind what Sam was doing, I didn't need for him to announce our love to everyone. The thought was too embarrassing.

"So you weren't kidding when you said you love this kid?" Owen asked, looking confused as ever. I had a feeling he was just slow.

My cheeks turned pink at his words.

"Definitely not kidding," Sam confirmed, looking around at his team. "I want everyone to know how I feel about him. I'm done hiding and I don't care what any of you have to say about it."

He was met by silence and blank stares before a few of the guys started nodding.

"So none of you are going to mess with him, right?" Sam asserted, his eyes narrowed as he glanced around at the group.

The team stayed silent.

"I need an answer," Sam sternly stated.

He was met by a chorus of assurances that they would abide by his rule. Sam nodded at his teammates before gripping my hand harder and pulling me along with him.

I groaned. "Where are we going now?"

"I need to talk to some people," Sam told me.

He led me back over to the Warriors' side where the cheerleaders stood. I could only imagine what he was about to do. He released my hand as he walked over to a group of girls. I recognized one of them as the cheerleader he hooked up with at the beginning of the year.

I couldn't hear what Sam said, but I heard one of the girls reply, "I would smack the shit out of you if you weren't injured."

She looked over at me and walked over. I wasn't prepared for this, but she stopped in front of me with her hands on her hips.

"He really loves you, you know," she told me with a thoughtful expression. "He really just ran the risk of getting attacked just to come apologize to us so he can be a better man for you."

"He apologized?" I asked, my eyes widening.

She hummed in confirmation, sticking a sweet smile on her face before walking back to her friends, passing Sam as he made his way back to me.

"Why are you doing all of this?" I questioned when he stood beside me.

"I did some thinking while we were apart," he told me. "You even said it, actions speak volumes. I can't just say I love you and I'm sorry and expect you to forgive me. I need to actively work on being better for you."

I nodded, not entirely clear where he was going with this.

"I can't change my past," Sam continued, "but I can do my best to make things right and change for my future."

A smile creeped onto my face at his words.

"I'm done hiding," Sam told me with a smile, "I want everyone to know how I feel about you."

And with that, he started walking over to a celebrating Warriors team. My eyes widened at the thought of what he might do. I appreciated his efforts, but waltzing on over to the Warriors made it seem like he had a death wish. I guess he was just done being scared.

"Sam," I called out, going after him.

He didn't turn to face me as he continued his way to his opposing team. They were all standing in a large group, hugging each other and cheering for their win as they waited for the trophy to be brought out to them.

Sam put himself right in the middle of the group, grabbing the attention of everyone. Nathan glanced over to me with a questioning look and I just shrugged, moving to stand next to him.

"What the hell is he doing?" Nathan whispered as the whole team grew silent, waiting for Sam to speak.

"Embarrassing me," I muttered, causing Nathan to let out a laugh.

"I just wanted to say good game," Sam announced to the team. "It's been great playing against you guys for four years."

"Shut the fuck up Knight," one of the players called out, "Don't try and play nice now after what you did just because you lost."

Other guys from the team started muttering in agreement. Nathan looked as if he was about to say something, but Rick beat him to it.

"Let him talk," Rick shouted and it was enough to shut the team up.

Some of the team shot Rick looks of bewilderment and glanced at Nathan who just nodded for Sam to continue.

"I'm sorry if you felt like I was trying to play dirty with what happened with Mason," Sam continued, "but that's not the case. I never meant for that to happen. I love Mason and I would never use him like that."

The team gawked at him, though not all of them. Some of them must have seen us kiss after Sam talked to Mason. The guys looked to Nathan for his reaction, but he kept his expression casual.

"Okay, Knight," Nathan started, "Now go to the hospital and get your shoulder fixed up so I can kick your ass in college ball too."

Sam smiled at him before nodding and making his way back over to me.

I was overwhelmed with feelings of Sam's love. The fact that he wanted to clear the air with everyone, let them know that he and I were serious, was a bold act of commitment. It was hard to even remember why I was angry with him when he was doing that.

"You don't have to come," Sam started, "but I should probably go get my arm checked."

I turned around to look at Nathan to see that he wasn't looking at us anymore. Instead he was in conversation with an older man wearing an LSU hat. I smiled at the thought of Nathan being scouted before turning to face Sam.

"I'll go with you," I answered, wrapping my arm around his waist and leaning into his side.

He smiled down at me and kissed the side of my head. The two of us made our way to his family where he was instantly bombarded with questions by Mae and Lila. I stayed glued to his side while he answered their worries.

And I didn't miss Jonah's approving smile directed at the two of us.

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Sam and I sat alone in his hospital room, the curtains pulled around our area to separate us from the others that shared the room. Jonah and Mae were getting food with the kids, leaving the two of us alone for the first time since we spoke at the field. Even though it felt like our issues were resolved

and we admitted our love for each other, there was still an awkwardness in the air.

"We need to talk," Sam finally spoke up after a few moments of silence, the only other sound coming from low chatters around us.

"Yeah, we do," I agreed, repositioning myself in the chair next to his bed. "Look, I'm really sorry for freaking out without letting you explain."

Sam just shook his head. "No, you gave me the opportunity to explain and I blew it."

I was about to disagree with him before he spoke up again.

" *But* , if we are going to make this relationship work, we need to trust each other," Sam continued.

I nodded in agreement. "I promise I will trust you from now on. I let my stupid insecurities control my emotions before—"

"Mase—" Sam started.

"Please let me finish," I interrupted him. He responded with a slow nod.

"I don't think I ever really fully trusted you at the start of our relationship," I continued, "it was always in the back of my mind that you didn't feel the same way I did or that you were just using me, so when I heard Jake at your house that night, my biggest fear came true and I panicked."

Sam gave me an understanding nod, reaching over to grab my hand in his.

"I know I've always had an issue with jumping to conclusions," I added, causing Sam to let out a snort of laughter. I smiled at him and continued, "but I promise from now on, that is going to change. I don't want to lose you just because I won't let you get a damn word in."

"That's all I ask, Mase," Sam replied in a soft tone, his eyes wide and warm with happiness. "I want you to be able to trust me."

I did trust him. If I wanted this relationship to work, I needed to grow from my insecurities and stop letting them get in the way of my relationship with Sam.

"And I promise to communicate with you better," Sam continued. "I want to have communication and honesty with you."

I smiled. "I want that too."

"And I will always show you how much I love you," Sam said in a serious tone, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. "I love you too much for you not to know it."

I blushed at his words and mumbled a quiet, "I love you too."

We were silent for a few moments before I decided to speak up again.

"I was so angry at you, and I'm still a little mad that you didn't speak up and tell everyone the truth when those pictures came out," I admitted.

I hadn't really had the chance to think about it since before I thought he was using me, but a lot of this could have been avoided if Sam was just truthful. If he owned up to being in a relationship with me, I wouldn't have had to deal with being thrown out of the closet all on my own.

"I know. I'm going to make it up to you. I swear," he replied in a serious tone. "I should have stood up for you, but I just let you take all the heat alone. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

His eyes were wide and glistening, begging me to forgive him. Part of me already did forgive him, but the other part worried that if I forgave him too quickly for this then I would end up resenting him for it.

"We need to work at this together," Sam continued. "We don't have to rush back into a relationship, but I want us to work out. And I will do what I can to get you to forgive me."

I smiled widely at him. "I like the sound of that."

Sam took his hand from mine and placed it on the bottom of my chin to tilt my head toward him. He smiled widely at me before placing a sweet kiss on my lips.

"Uncle Sammy!" Lila squealed, causing the two of us to pull apart. She flung herself with full force up onto the bed to sit on his lap. "Is your arm okay Uncle Sammy?"

I chuckled lightly at the concerned look on her face. Jonah, Mae, and Miles walked in the room less than a second later, Jonah passing me a McDonald's bag.

"I don't know yet, but I'm sure it'll be fine," Sam assured his niece.

"So I take it you two are back together?"Mae asked with a wide grin, looking between the two of us.

Sam and I shared a look before I responded, "We're working on it."

"Thank God," Miles said with a sigh of relief. "Sam was so grumpy without you, Mason."

I let out a loud laugh, looking toward Sam's reddening cheeks.

"Is that so?"

Sam sighed, sending me a glare. "Since we just talked about being honest with each other, yes, I was *grumpy* ."

Lila let out a loud giggle at Sam's "grumpy" tone.

"I'm glad you two are working it out," Jonah said kindly, leaning on the back of my chair.

"Me too," Sam and I said at the same time, causing the rest of the group to laugh.

I couldn't seem to wipe the smile off my face. It seemed as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, light had been restored in my life, and

maybe we were going to be okay.

I glanced over at Sam and nearly melted on the spot as his eyes met mine. When he looked at me, the whole world seemed to stop, but when I realized the way we felt about each other and the way he made me feel, my world was complete. He made me feel stronger, more secure, confident, and most of all, loved. *He* was my world.

We were definitely going to be okay.

**

Woo! That was a long one.

Were any of your surprised about Pete and Bella? What about Sam's injury and the Warriors winning the game? How do you feel about Sam's new attitude about being better for Mason? And his truce with Nathan? And what about Sam and Mason working on their relationship?

One chapter left! (Plus an epilogue)

47

Mason Maloney

"I really don't like that you don't have your sling on," I voiced my concern to my newly sling-less boyfriend from the passenger's seat of his car.

The two of us weren't officially back together yet, but that didn't make me worry about him any less. We still spent lots of time together, acted like we were together, and referred to each other as boyfriends, but we hadn't actually made it official yet. He insisted he had to show me how much he loved me to get me to forgive him, and his efforts quickly dissipated my anger toward him.

" *Mase* ," he groaned, throwing his head back in annoyance. "My doctor cleared me. Do you want to argue with my doctor?"

"Maybe," I huffed, crossing my arms in a pout.

"Well, you'd lose that argument," Sam shot back, looking at me briefly before returning his eyes to the road. He kept one hand on the steering wheel while the other rested on the center console.

Truth be told, I was just nitpicking because I was nervous about what we were doing. After a week of us working on our relationship, Sam asked me if I wanted to go meet his mother. He said it was one of the ways he was going to show me how important I was to him, having me meet another extremely important person in his life.

Of course, I instantly said yes, but now that the time had come, I was worried. Sam seldom spoke about his mother, but from the times he did talk about her, I could tell how much she meant to him. If she ended up not liking me, that would undoubtedly put us in an awkward position.

"Hey," Sam suddenly said, grabbing my attention from my worry filled thoughts. "I can tell you're stressing out. I told you not to worry about it."

I rolled my eyes. "You know, telling me not to worry doesn't actually help."

"Listen," he started with a sigh, "there's no reason for my mom not to like you. She's the one in prison, not you."

I smacked his arm. "Don't say that."

"It's true!"

The look on my face was chastising him, so he just shook his head and continued down the road.

"Anyways, she's going to love you. She practically already does," Sam assured me after a few moments of silence.

"How?"

"Obviously, I've told her about you," Sam told me in a tone that suggested I should have known that.

" *Great* ," I sarcastically hissed. "Now she's going to meet me and be disappointed."

Sam sent a glare my way. "Do you want me to drop you off on the side of the road? Because I'm about to."

"Maybe," I grumbled and crossed my arms, not actually meaning my words.

Sam reached over and placed his hand on my knee, running his thumb over it comfortingly. I glanced over at him with thankful eyes. No more words were said for the rest of the ride until we pulled onto the long driveway of the prison. I gazed around at my surroundings, seeing the barbed wired fences and the daunting buildings that seemed to go on for miles.

"Got your ID?" Sam checked with me as he drove slowly down the road. I nodded.

When we reached the gate to the visitor parking lot, Sam stopped the car and held his hand out for my ID, which I gave him. He talked to the officer after handing him our IDs and after giving them back, he opened the gate and told us where to park.

"I would leave your wallet and stuff in the car," Sam suggested after parking.

"Okay."

I tried not to stare at everything in awe as we walked through the parking lot toward a small building. Sam held the door open for me before we headed inside and went to a desk in the front of the room. He gave the woman at the desk our IDs that he held onto from before and then the two of us had to stand over to the side and wait for an officer to come pat us down after we filled out some paper work.

After getting checked with a pat down and metal detectors, the officer led us outside to a larger building which was connected to the larger prison. The room he brought us to was filled with tables and chairs and even had some games and a TV in the corner along with a few vending machines.

"She'll be here in a few minutes," Sam assured me as we sat down at a table in the corner of the room.

"How often do you get to come here?" I asked, looking around at other people who were visiting their loved ones.

"Depends," Sam answered with a shrug. "Sometimes the warden restricts visiting hours to avoid overcrowding in the visiting room, but she's technically allowed four one-hour visits a month. They let her get away with more sometimes though. If they can."

"What about for Christmas?"

"They hold a bigger visit on Christmas Eve and Christmas in one of the gyms," Sam replied. "Aren't you coming with us on Christmas Eve?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I just didn't know how it was going to work."

Christmas Eve was only a week away, but I was glad Sam brought me to meet his mother before then. That way we could get through the awkwardness of just meeting each other before the holiday.

Before anything else was said between us, the door to the visiting room opened and a woman that slightly resembled Sam was ushered into the room. Sam stood up and waited for her to be un-cuffed. When she was free, she made her way over to her son and hugged him tightly. The closer she got, the more I realized how much Jonah looked like her.

"And you must be Mason," she greeted me with a wide grin. I stood up and gave her a brief hug. I assumed she wasn't supposed to be giving too many hugs in the visiting room. "It's so good to finally meet you."

"You too," I told her honestly with a grin of my own.

As soon as I saw her, my nerves melted away. She looked to be about one of the sweetest women in the world, definitely not someone who belonged in a prison.

The three of us sat down at the table, Sam and I next to each other with his mom, Melissa, across from us holding tightly onto Sam's hands.

"How have you been doing, Mom?" Sam asked her, a little bit of concern in his voice. I could tell just by the way he looked at her that he worried about her being here.

"Great, actually," she cheerfully replied. "I finally got a job in the laundry department."

Sam smiled. "That's awesome."

When Sam was telling me about his mother before we came here, he told me that she had applied to work in the laundry department and she really wanted the job because it was one of the highest paying jobs in the prison

and had the longest hours so she would have something to do throughout the day.

"Enough about me," Melissa said, turning to give me another smile. "Tell me how you two are doing. Sam doesn't shut up about you, Mason."

I chuckled and looked over to Sam who didn't look the least bit embarrassed about what his mom just revealed.

"Hope he says good things," I joked, looking back toward Melissa.

"Of course, he does!" she told me enthusiastically. "About how sweet you are and how much he lov–"

Melissa cut herself off with a shocked look on her face, covering her mouth with her hands. Her eyes were wide as they darted to her son.

"It's okay, I told him," Sam assured her with a chuckle, causing me to laugh as well.

"Oh, thank God," Melissa breathed out a sigh of relief. "I thought I just dropped the bomb before you had the chance."

"Mason's oblivious, he probably wouldn't have noticed anyway," Sam teased, nudging my side.

I scoffed. " *You're* the oblivious one." However, I knew that wasn't true.

Sam gave me a knowing look, but didn't say anything to negate my statement.

"What are you guys up to later today? Anything fun?" Melissa asked, putting her chin in the palm of her hand and looking lovingly between the two of us.

"Sam's meeting my parents," I told her with a teasing smirk directed toward my boyfriend. He acted like he wasn't nervous about it, but I knew he was.

"That's exciting!" Melissa cheered with wide eyes. Sam just nodded, not meeting my gaze.

I didn't plan on forcing Sam to sit through a dinner with my parents, but when I came out to them, they insisted.

*

"You need to tell them eventually," Nathan told me, standing in front of my bed with his hands on his hips. "You're out to everyone but them now. You know they're going to want to meet Knight."

I groaned, throwing my head back on my pillow and staring up at the ceiling.

"I know," I whined. "But they're just going to embarrass me."

Nathan rolled his eyes. "You're just going to have to get over it."

"What do you need to tell us?" Mom suddenly asked from the doorway, causing Nathan and I both to jump back in shock. She stood at the door with the laundry basket resting under her arm on her hip and stared at us expectantly, her eyebrows raised in question.

"Well?" she asked when we didn't respond, both of us still gaping at her.

"Uh..." Nathan trailed with a panicked expression, turning to me for help.

"Can we talk about this later?" I practically begged her.

"I'm going to throw this laundry in then we can talk downstairs," Mom answered with a pointed look, grabbing the clothes out of my hamper and leaving the room.

Nathan and I watched the doorway as she left. While Nathan was still turned away from me, I got up from the bed and started rapidly smacking him on the shoulder.

"Mase, stop!" he exclaimed, shoving me gently away from him.

I didn't say anything as I made my way downstairs, Nathan following behind me. I didn't have to tell him that I wanted him there with me, he just knew.

By the time we got downstairs, both of our parents were sitting on the two-seat couch in the living room waiting for us. Nathan and I sat on the couch across from them as they stared at us with impatient looks.

"You have something to say, Mason?" Dad asked me, leaning forward in his seat.

I took a deep breath and let it out.

"I'm gay," I told them, deciding not the beat around the bush. I knew they wouldn't be upset with me for this.

They both looked completely unfazed.

"We know," Dad said with a blank expression. "We saw you kissing that boy at the football game."

My face flushed at his confession.

"Why didn't you say anything then?" I asked, looking between both of my parents.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Dad asked with raised eyebrows, mimicking my tone.

He got me there. I didn't have an answer for him.

"Well, that's it," I said, standing up from my seat. My parents gave me knowing looks as if telling me to sit back down and Nathan rugged on my arm to pull me back to the couch.

"That's not it," Mom said. "Is that boy you were kissing your boyfriend?"

When I hesitated, Nathan solidly punched my arm which caused me to rub the spot and scowl at him. Our mother reprimanded him and then turned

back to me to hear my answer.

"Kind of," I quietly mumbled. Not officially, but he basically was.

"If you're going to have a boyfriend then we have to meet him," Dad told me with a stern look on his face. "We need to make sure this boy is right for you."

I groaned and place my hand over my face. "Dad–"

"And Nathan you better be watching out for him," Dad turned to my brother with the same serious expression. Nathan just nodded.

"We can have him over for dinner!" Mom cheerfully suggested to which my father immediately agreed with her. This was the last thing I wanted.

"Perfect, it's settled then," Mom confirmed with a smile.

"And Mason," Dad added before I could get up and leave. "We love you."

Mom nodded in agreement. "We love you both no matter what."

That caused a wide grin to spread on my face. Maybe a dinner with Sam wouldn't be a bad idea.

*

When I told Sam about it, he acted like it was fine, but I could see the slight panic in his eyes. He didn't want my parents to hate him, just like I didn't want his family to hate me.

"You guys are getting pretty serious, huh?" Melissa asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Yeah," Sam answered. "We're going to go to UCF together in the fall."

"If I get in," I reminded him.

Sam rolled his eyes. "You'll get in. It's not like it's hard."

"It's not hard for an extremely talented football player that the school has been watching since his rookie season," I argued to which Sam just waved me off and looked back at his mother who was staring at us happily.

"You two are so cute," she told us fondly.

It wasn't long before the hour was up and the two of us had to leave. Melissa had to head to the laundry department and finish up her work for the day, which she seemed pretty excited about. After a long hug with her son, Melissa walked over to me with a fond smile and her arms open wide.

"It was so nice to meet you, Mason," she told me as I wrapped my arms around her in a tight hug.

"You too," I told her truthfully. As I was about to let go, she squeezed me tighter and brought her mouth to my ear.

"Please take care of my boy. Take care of each other," she whispered. All I could do was nod and the two of us separated, Melissa giving me a thankful look.

Sam and I were escorted out of the room at the same time Melissa was and after being checked out by the guards again, the two of us headed back to Sam's car.

"What did she say to you?" Sam asked me as he started the car.

"Don't worry about it," I told him. There was a reason she whispered it so he wouldn't hear, so I wasn't going to tell him.

Sam playfully glared at me, but didn't push me further.

"Your mom's great," I spoke up after we turned off of the prison property.

Sam hummed in agreement, a minuscule smile on his face.

"Is it bad that I sometimes get so mad at her for getting locked up?" Sam asked after a few moments of silence, sounding frustrated.

I thought about it for a moment.

"No, I don't think so," I replied honestly. "But she loves you so much, Sam. She did what she did because she loves you."

"I know," he responded with a sigh, running his fingers through his hair. "It's just– she's missing out on my life, on the kids' lives."

I nodded in understanding. "She probably thinks about that every day."

"Yeah," Sam sighed again. "She probably does."

"It's okay for you to be angry," I assured him, placing my hand on his thigh. "Just don't forget that she loves you."

We didn't talk about it for the rest of the ride.

"Hey," I spoke up when we were nearing home. "Can you drop me off at home?"

Sam glanced at me with a quizzical look.

"I thought you were coming to mine and we were going to your house together," Sam said confusedly.

"We were, but I think I should go calm my parents down a bit and make sure they're not going to be super embarrassing," I admitted with a shudder.

I knew if I didn't go home before Sam arrived, I would be bombarded with my parents being over the top. I had to calm them down before he got there so they wouldn't scare him off.

A few minutes later, Sam pulled his car in front of my house.

"I guess I'll see you later," Sam said with a sigh and a slight smile.

"Unless you run off," I teased with a smirk. Sam just rolled his eyes.

"You just want me to be nervous. You're making it up in your head," he told me with a knowing look.

I ignored him. "If you run off, I'll be able to catch you. You know, I'm a runner now."

Sam let out a chuckle. "You've gotten cocky since you beat your mile time. You really think you can outrun me?"

I laughed loudly and shook my head.

Last week at school I was able to do my gym final and I actually beat my mile time by a whole minute. I was surprised, but Ross wasn't. He said he knew I practiced enough to improve it significantly.

I kissed Sam goodbye, but he pulled me in for another when I parted from him. He waited for me to get inside the house before he drove away. As I walked toward the kitchen, I could smell dinner cooking and when I got there, my eyes widened.

"Mom!" I yelled, gaining her attention.

"Yes, sweetie?" she answered kindly.

"Why are you making so much food? Why is there a tablecloth on the table?" I asked her, looking around the room to see the copious amounts of food that resided on the counters.

The table in the dining room had a fancy linen tablecloth on it that I was sure had never been used. She even had our nice holiday dishes out. We weren't the type of family to be so formal and I knew she was going to pull something like this with Sam coming over.

"I don't want Sam to think we live like animals," she told me, placing her hands on her hips. She didn't have to worry about that. Sam's family was even less formal than us and I liked it that way.

"He won't think that," I assured her in an almost pleading tone. "Just *please* tone it down."

"You might want to talk to your father about 'toning it down'," she said with a pointed look. "He's been practicing his 'boyfriend speech' for Sam all day."

I groaned loudly and turned out of the kitchen, taking the steps two at a time up to my parents' room. Dad was sitting on the bed on his phone when I entered.

"Please tell me you are not planning a *speech* for my boyfriend," I said seriously, my hand still tightly gripping the doorknob.

Dad stood from the bed. "I just need to have a talk with him. Man to man. Alone."

"No," I shook my head. I wasn't even going to comment on his "man to man" remark.

"I need to make sure he's right for you," Dad argued.

"You don't," I countered, shaking my head again.

"Nathan!" Dad called out as my brother walked down the hall. Nathan pokes his head in the room behind me when he heard his name.

"What?"

"Mason doesn't want me to give Sam a talk," Dad told him as if he couldn't believe I didn't want that.

"Okay?" Nathan replied in a confused tone.

"Tell him I need to," Dad commanded, gesturing toward me. I settled a hard scowl on Nathan as he looked down at me.

Nathan sighed and ran his hand down his face. "Maybe you shouldn't give him your talk tonight."

"Or ever," I added.

Dad shook his head at me and walked over to Nathan and I at his doorway.

"You two are ganging up on me," Dad started. "Cut me some slack. I'm just trying to protect you. I know how teenage boys can be."

"I'm a teenage boy," I deadpanned, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Yeah, but you're sensitive," Dad countered, placing his hand on my shoulder and causing Nathan to laugh loudly.

I sighed and turned to Nathan. "You convince him to keep his mouth shut tonight. I'm going to go force Mom to put some of that food away."

Nathan just nodded in agreement and I rushed down the stairs to meet my mother in the kitchen once again.

" *Please* let me put some of this away," I pleaded, moving next to Mom beside the stove.

Mom placed her hands on her hips and shot me a stern look.

"I don't know why you don't want him to be well fed," she said in a slightly accusatory tone.

"He doesn't need an eight course meal," I tried to reason with her.

"I just wanted to make sure there was enough," Mom told me, looking around at the food on the counters. "Maybe I went a little bit overboard."

It was more than a little bit, but I wouldn't say that to her.

Eventually, I convinced my mother that we didn't need all of the excess food so the two of us started covering it and putting it away in the fridge. As I helped her clean up the kitchen, Dad and Nathan came down the stairs, Nathan looking irritated.

"I hope you've convinced him to keep quiet," I said to my brother as he came to stand beside me.

Nathan sighed. "I don't know. He's in overprotective dad mode."

My shoulders sagged and I hung my head as I groaned in annoyance.

"Sam will never want to come here again after this," I groaned, shaking my head.

Nathan shrugged. "That's fine by me," he joked with a smirk.

I shot him an irritated look, eyes narrowed as if willing him to retract his statement.

"Kidding," Nathan added with a light smile, holding his hands up in surrender.

I was happy to see him so at-ease and casual when talking about Sam. The end of the football season and Sam's apology seemed to have calmed Nathan down quite a bit. Now that they were both signed to D1 schools hundreds of miles away from each other, there was nothing for them to compete over. That is, until they're both fighting to get into the NFL, but we had a bit of time before that happened.

"Look, I think you should just let Dad do whatever he's gonna do," Nathan started, causing me to let an argumentative expression take over. "Let me finish. You're probably going to freak out about it more than Knight is, so don't worry about it."

"Boys!" Mom called us over. We glanced at her expectantly. "Go set the table, please."

I sighed while Nathan laughed at my expense and motioned for me to follow him to the kitchen table. The two of us set the table, my mother told us we did it wrong, and then we set it again to her liking. More time had passed than I thought and before I was ready, there was a knock on the door. My mom instantly shot toward the door before I stopped her.

"Stay in the kitchen," I said with a stern look, pointing behind her. "You too," I added when my dad came into view looking like he was going to

head toward the door. They each gave me looks of protest, but I turned on my heel and walked toward the door before either of them could say anything.

I ripped the front door open to reveal Sam wearing dark jeans that fit his legs nicely and a charcoal button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His hair was tastefully pushed back how I liked it and a charming smile was painted on his face. Needless to say, he looked *hot* . He held a bouquet of flowers in his hands and I smiled at his appearance.

"You didn't have to bring those," I told him, pointing toward the flowers.

"These aren't for you," Sam replied. "They're for your Mom."

"That makes sense."

Sam chuckled. "Can I come in?"

"I'm not sure if you want to go in there," I warned him, stepping aside so he could come in the house. "We should just ditch them."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Yeah, because that would make a *great* impression on your parents."

"I'm worried more about their impression on you than yours on them," I admitted, grabbing his free hand in mine.

"It'll be fine. I'll love them," Sam assured me, placing a comforting kiss on my forehead.

"Mason?" Mom called out, staying in the kitchen. I groaned and pulled Sam with me toward the sound of her voice. My parents and Nathan were waiting for us in the kitchen when we got there.

Sam let go out my hand and immediately greeted my parents, like the charming person he was.

"It's so nice to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Maloney," Sam said with a friendly smile on his face. He and my father shook hands and I could tell Dad was

already impressed by his outgoing and polite attitude.

"These are for you, Mrs. Maloney," Sam said to my Mom, holding the flowers for her to take.

A pleasantly surprised look took over her face. "Thank you so much, Sam! They're beautiful."

Sam and Nathan shared a nod as a greeting and I figured that was all I was going to get out of them. It was an improvement from hate filled glares, so I would take it.

"Go sit!" Mom insisted. "I'm just going to put these in a vase and grab the food."

"Do you need any help?" Sam asked her kindly. I had to keep myself from rolling my eyes as my mother put a hand on her chest and looked as if she was swooning over him.

"That's so sweet of you, but you're our guest! Please take a seat," she replied appreciatively.

Sam, Nathan, and I started toward the kitchen table while Dad went to help Mom.

"Quit being a kiss ass," I muttered, purposely bumping into my boyfriend.

A coy smirk took over his face and he glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm not," he lied.

"You should probably warn him about Dad," Nathan reminded me as the three of us sat at the table, Nathan across from me while Sam was to my right.

I gave Nathan a grateful look before turning to Sam.

"My dad is going to try to give you a *talk* . Please ignore him," I warned Sam to which he just chuckled.

"Stop worrying so much. It's all you do," Sam resounded.

"Dad's been kind of overprotective of Mase lately. Especially since he found out about you guys," Nathan told him, leaning back in his seat. "It'll probably be awkward as hell, just let him have his Dad moment."

"Noted," Sam replies with a light smile.

I couldn't help but let a smile take over my own face at their interaction. It was small and nothing special, but it was so much better than before and for that I was grateful.

Mom and Dad were at the table a few moments later, bringing in the food and setting it on the table. Mom sat at the head of the table while Dad sat directly across from Sam and I nearly died on the spot. This wasn't going to be an ideal seating arrangement.

"How's your shoulder holding up, Sam?" Mom thoughtfully asked after we all had food on our plates.

"Pretty good," he answered. "I'm starting physical therapy after Christmas. I should be ready by August for football."

"That's great!" Mom replied with a wide smile. I could tell she loved him already even with the small amount of time she had spent with him. "Where are you going again?"

Sam looked at me briefly before glancing back at my mother. I may have failed to mention to my parents that the number one reason why I wanted to go to UCF was because of Sam.

"UCF," he told her and both of my parents' eyes shot to me.

"So that's why you want to go there," Dad thought aloud. My cheeks and tips of my ears burned in embarrassment as Sam looked at me with a teasing expression and Nathan laughed at my expense.

"That may or may not be a reason," I said, trying to conceal my embarrassment.

Dad gave me a knowing look but didn't say anything to embarrass me further.

"That's great that you signed with a D1 school," Mom said, bringing the attention back to Sam. "Nathan just committed to LSU, so I'm sure you'll be seeing each other during the season."

"Yeah, he told me. That's great," Sam politely responded.

"He did?" I questioned, sounding astonished. I looked between my brother and my boyfriend with a look of bewilderment.

"We text sometimes," Nathan mumbled with a shrug as if it wasn't a big deal.

"You do?"

Why hadn't Sam told me about this?

"Yes, Mase," Sam said in a teasing tone, causing my parents to let out small laughs.

"So, Sam," Dad started.

"Oh, here we go," I complained.

"Quiet," Dad shushed me. "Now Sam, you seem like a perfectly nice young man. I just want you to know that we expect you to treat our son with respect."

"Of course," Sam replied respectfully, his attentive gaze on my father.

"And we expect him to do the same for you," Dad continued.

I held my head in my hands, waiting for the awkwardness to be over.

"And I assumed the two of you will be living together on campus in the fall," Dad looked to each of us for clarification to which we both nodded. "Living with your significant other can be hard, especially in the beginning. You need to respect each other's space and have lives outside of each other."

Sam nodded, his attention never leaving my dad. I could tell Dad enjoyed having his respectful, undivided attention.

"And you *both* need to be safe when you're... intimate," Dad let out, mortifying me in the process.

" *Dad,"* I hissed, shaking my head at him to try and make him stop.

"Honey, I'm sure they're not... never mind," Mom tried to reason. She put an apologetic smile on her face and I let out a groan. I made eye contact with Nathan, practically begging him to get our parents to stop talking.

"Dad, I think they get it," Nathan cut in, but Dad held his hand up to stop him.

"Let me finish," he started again. " *Respect* each other. No means no. Use protection. Okay, I'm done."

"Okay, thanks, Dad," I let out quick to shut him up.

"Thank you Mr. Maloney," Sam respectfully added. "I want you to know that I love and respect your son very much."

A wide smile broke out on my Dad's face. "That's good to hear."

The rest of the dinner went by smoothly. Sam and Dad joked together and I could tell that Sam was relieved that he and my dad were getting along. It was around eight by the time we were done with dinner and dessert and my mother began cleaning up the table.

"Would you like any help, Mrs. Maloney?" Sam politely offered. I kicked the back of his leg as we stood up and gave him an annoyed look as he turned to face me briefly.

"No, no. Thank you for offering though," Mom replied with a wide smile.

"Kiss ass," Nathan muttered under a cough.

"Nathan," Mom chastised. Nathan gave my mom an innocent look before stepping out of the kitchen and into the living room where our dad was, Sam and I following closely behind.

We sat to watch TV for a while and Mom came in soon after we sat down.

"Sam," Mom started after the show went on a commercial. "You should come over some time on Christmas."

"I wouldn't want to intrude," Sam kindly responded. I had to hold myself back from gagging at his tone. I wasn't used to him being so polite.

"We would love to have you!" Dad quickly assured him.

After Sam accepted my parents' offer, we finished watching TV and he decided it was time for him to leave. He said goodbye to my parents and Nathan, shaking my father's hand and giving my mother a hug.

"Am I staying at yours tonight?" I asked him as we walked out of the living room.

Sam shook his head. "I'll pick you up tomorrow for Lila's party."

"Why?"

"I need to make a good impression on your parents, I can't take you to mine for the night. They'll get ideas," Sam explained, stopping at the front door and turning to face me.

I rolled my eyes. "That's stupid."

Sam smiled down at me, placing his hand on my chin to tilt my head up. He gave me a brief kiss, continuing to smile as he did so.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said after pulling away. "I love you."

My stomach fluttered at his words. I was never going to get sick of hearing him say that.

"I love you too."

And with that, Sam headed out to his car and I watched as he left before returning to the living room where my family sat.

"Sam's a great young man," Dad told me as I sat down beside him.

Mom nodded her head in agreement. "He's wonderful."

I couldn't help but smile, happy and relieved that my parents liked him. They didn't even embarrass me *too* bad.

"But I mean what I said about you two being safe, I won't be able to look after you while you're in Florida," Dad warned, giving me a stern look.

"Dad," Nathan started with a wicked smirk on his face. "Mason and Sam don't have sex, he just comes home with hickeys—"

" *Nathan!* " I screeched, jumping at him to cover his mouth with my hand.

"I don't want to know the details," Dad replied, shaking his head.

Nathan shoved me away from him and I took a seat to his left and we finished the night together as a family.

***

I was sitting on my bed wrapping a present for Lila when Nathan barged into my room and sat down beside me.

"I texted Knight and told him I'm giving you the car to take to his house," Nathan informed me.

I raised my eyebrow at him. "Why? And when did you two even start talking?"

Nathan shrugged. "The night of the championship."

"You were texting that night? I was with him that night."

"Just a little bit," Nathan answered. "I thought he would've told you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked. I wasn't angry about it. In fact, I was unbelievably happy about it, but I didn't understand why neither of them had mentioned it.

Nathan teasingly smiled. "Because I thought he would have told you."

I playfully rolled my eyes before finishing wrapping up Lila's present.

"What did you get her?" Nathan wondered, holding up the box and shaking it.

"Just some bracelet making set. Sam said she's been into crafts lately," I casually told him. I had no idea what to get a seven year old girl for her birthday and Sam turned out to be very little help.

"I have no idea what little girls like," Nathan admitted, placing the present back down on my bed.

"Me neither," I said with a small laugh.

Nathan left my room soon after he handed over the car keys. After finishing getting ready, I headed down the stairs and outside to the car where I unfortunately met up with Rick who was walking toward the front door.

"You heading to see lover boy?" Rick asked as he walked by me.

I ignored him and got in the car, watching as he walked into the house to see Nathan.

Rick surprisingly didn't bother me too much about being with Sam. Sure, he teased me, but it was nothing malicious and I could deal with a little innocent teasing.

Soon after leaving my house, I was pulling up to Sam's. There were a bunch of cars parked on the street, so I had to park a little ways away from Sam's house. After parking and grabbing Lila's present, I walked up to the house and knocked on the door. I could hear excited shrieks from little girls from where I stood and I let out a chuckle thinking about Lila playing with her friends.

Jonah opened the door a few moments later and invited me in.

"You know, you don't have to knock," he said.

"I don't want to be rude," I shot back with an amused smile.

Jonah shook his head at me. "Do you seriously think I'm concerned about you being rude?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "Good point, you're the rude one."

Jonah snorted out a laugh. "Funny."

"Hi Masey!" Lila exclaimed, suddenly barreling into my legs and catching me off guard.

I stumbled a bit, putting my free arm around her. "Hi Lila. Happy birthday!"

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she excitedly squealed, bouncing up and down.

"Personal space, Lila," Jonah reminded her and she let go of me, though she didn't back away.

When I got a good look at her, I saw that her face was painted with a pink and blue butterfly around her eye.

"Cool face paint," I complimented, pointing down at her.

"Do you want your face painted?" she asked me with a hopeful look, tugging on my arm. I heard Jonah laugh loudly at me.

I smiled at her. "Maybe later."

And with that, Lila said bye to me and bounced off with her face painted friends.

The living room was filled with kids and adults and some people were in the kitchen. I never knew this place could hold this many people, but even though it was full, it was still comfortable.

"Where's Sam?" I asked Jonah, looking around the living room and seeing no sight of my boyfriend.

"Kitchen with Jack," he answered, taking a sip out of his pink solo cup.

I thanked him before walking off to the kitchen in search for my boyfriend. Once I got there, I spotted him immediately, talking with Jack and a man I didn't recognize.

"Hey," I greeted with a smile as I made my way over to them.

Sam's face brightened when he saw me, holding his arm out for me. When I reached him, he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a chaste kiss on the lips.

"Mase, this is my Uncle Shawn. He's my Mom's brother," Sam introduced, motioning to the man I didn't recognize. "This is my boyfriend I was telling you about," he told his Uncle.

"Sam doesn't seem to shut up about you," Shawn joked, holding his hand out for me to shake.

I shook his hand and smiled at him, letting him know that it was nice to meet him. I quickly greeted Jack before turning back to Sam, holding up Lila's present.

"Where do I put this?" I asked. Sam took the box from me and put it on the counter behind him.

"Here is good for now," he replied with a goofy grin. His eyes widened a few moments later as if he remembered something he wanted to tell me.

"Mase, you'll never guess what Jack just told me," Sam said, the smile on his face widening.

I looked over to Jack. "What?"

"Tell him," Sam urged with an uncharacteristic giggle.

My eyes widened at my boyfriend and I let out a laugh. "Chill."

Jack let out a sigh with an amused smile on his face.

"I went out on a date with your friend Bella a while back," Jack confessed with a shrug.

My eyes bugged out of my head. " *You're* the Tinder guy?"

"I guess?"

Sam laughed loudly, throwing his head back. Shawn laughed lightly along with him, shaking his head in amusement.

"I told him I guess it didn't work out," Sam got out between laughs, "since she's with Pete now."

"I don't know why you're laughing. You slept with her, I didn't," Jack shot at him with a challenging look. That was enough to get Sam to stop laughing and me to shoot a glare over at Jack.

"We don't talk about that," I warned him to which he held his hands up in defense.

"Sorry," Jack said with a sheepish smile. "Anyway, Bella's a cool girl, but it was obvious she was hung up on someone. That's why it didn't work out."

"Okay, let's stop talking about her," Sam suggested, looking over at men and I nodded at him. "Shawn's gonna come with us to see my Mom on

Christmas Eve."

"That'll be nice," I said with a smile, looking over at Shawn.

Shawn nodded. "Yeah, I don't live around here so I don't get to visit her often. I'm excited."

"Where do you live?" I asked, leaning into Sam.

"North Carolina," he answered. "The company I worked for up here moved down there a few years back and I went with them."

We continued talking in the kitchen until Mae announced that it was time for Lila's cake. Lila sat down in her chair that was decorated with balloons and ribbons while the rest of us gathered around the table in the cramped kitchen. Sam's arm found its way around my waist as we sang to Lila.

"You want some cake?" Sam asked me after Lila blew out her candles.

"Can we just share a piece?" I sheepishly suggested to which he just sent me an annoyed glare.

Although he didn't seem to happy about it, Sam obliged and got one piece of cake with two forks so that I could eat off of his plate.

"I hope the cake came out good," Mae joked as she handed the paper plate with our piece on it to Sam. She was only saying that because Sam had went to the bakery this morning to make the cake with Charlene.

I stabbed the cake with my fork and took a small bite, smiling over at Mae.

"It's good," I assured her.

"It better be," Sam uttered, stuffing a piece in his mouth. "I woke up early for this thing."

"And I'm sure Charlene did most of the work," I pointed out with a knowing look.

"It was work just having to deal with her this morning!" Sam exclaimed. "She's already designing our wedding cake!"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Sandy already has her bridesmaids dress picked out. She showed it to me."

Sam scoffed, shoving another bite of cake into his mouth.

"She is *not* being a bridesmaid."

"I can be a bridesmaid though, right?" Christo said as he suddenly appeared between us, throwing his arms around our shoulders.

"Only if you wear a dress," I joked.

"I'd look hot in a dress," he replied before trying to pick up a piece of our cake with his mouth.

Sam jolted away from him before he had the chance.

"Get your own!" Sam exclaimed.

Christo released me and stood with his hands on his hips. "So you'll share with him, but you won't share with me?"

"Yes."

Christo just rolled his eyes and let out a sigh.

"Are you two back together yet or what?" Christo asked, gesturing toward us.

"Not yet," I declined which caused Christo to groan.

"What's the point of acting like a couple if you're not one?" he questioned, throwing his hands in the air. "How much longer?"

"None of your business," Sam shut him up.

Truth be told, I was just waiting for Sam to ask me to be with him. We were already doing everything couples did, I just wanted to be *asked* .

"I just don't get it," Christo mumbled, shaking his head.

"It just takes time to fix things," Sam told him with a sigh, looking down at his plate.

I leaned over and gripped Sam's hand, giving him a light smile. "And we *are* fixing things."

"Well can you fix things a little faster?" Christo complained in a whiny tone.

"You sound like a child," Sam told him with a scowl to which I just let out a chuckle.

"You know what? Never mind. Mason can do better," Christo replied, Sam's scowl deepening.

"Uncle Sammy!" Lila exclaimed, grabbing our attention. Sam's scowl was immediately wiped off his face when looked down to where his niece stood with cake all over her face, pulling on his hand.

"Did you get any of that cake in your mouth?" Sam joke as he squatted down to her level.

Lila tilted her head in confusion. "Yes."

Sam playfully shook his head at her.

"Mommy said I can open my presents and *you* said earlier that you would help me," Lila told him with a serious look on her face.

"I did say that, didn't I?"

"Yup!" Lila nodded.

I laughed along with Christo as Lila began tugging Sam's arm, nearly making him lose his footing and topple over.

"Wait a sec," Sam said, standing to his full height and turning to me. "Will you go somewhere with me after the party?" he asked me in a hushed tone.

Lila continued tugging him, causing him to follow her while still looking my way.

All I could do was nod and wait.

***

After the party had ended, Sam and I stayed behind to help Jonah and Mae clean up. Mae insisted we didn't have to, but Jonah was more than happy to put us to work.

"You ready to go?" Sam asked me after we had finished cleaning.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

Sam just smiled and gestured for me to follow him.

My heart nearly stopped as I thought about what on Earth we were going to do. Maybe tonight would be the night Sam and I would *finally* be official again.

My finger tips tingled as they brushed along Sam's hand before grasping it and allowing him to lead me out to his car. It was dark outside, but warmer than usual for a December night.

"So, my truce with your brother is going good," Sam said after we had been driving for a few minutes.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, we've been talking a bit," he admitted, "he's not a bad guy."

I laughed. "What do you guys even talk about?"

Sam shrugged. "Football, you..."

"Me?"

Sam just shrugged again.

I sent him a puzzled look. "Why do you guys talk about me?"

"He helped me find the place I'm taking you to," Sam explained.

His words didn't do anything to solve my confusion. Nathan helping Sam out with a date spot? Maybe they were getting along a lot better than I had realized.

The drive was longer than I expected it to be. After nearly an hour, we had finally reached our destination and I was still confused as to what exactly we were doing.

"What is this place?" I asked Sam as he opened the car door for me and grabbed my hand, holding a rectangular object under his arm. "And what is that?"

"You'll see when we get in there," he replied as the two of us walked toward the large, brown building.

When we got inside, Sam paid for our tickets and we entered the main attraction. The main room we entered was filled with books, pages, and artwork all pertaining to Jane Austen.

"A literary museum?" I looked up and smiled at Sam.

Sam nodded with his own smile. "We found out that the museum was highlighting Jane Austen's career for the month and Bella told me how much you love *Pride and Prejudice* so..."

My eyes widened. "You talked to Bella? What, are you making amends with everyone?"

"Trying to," he replied.

My smile widened so far my cheeks ached, but I didn't want to wipe the look off my face.

"Let's go," Sam said, tugging on my hand. "I heard there's a whole room dedicated to *Pride and Prejudice."*

I was in awe when we entered the room. It was like I was stepping into the novel. I felt like if I just looked around I would be able to find Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy dancing.

"Wow," I let out with a breathy laugh. "This is so cool."

Sam nodded with a smug look and led me over to a part of the room where there were quotes from the novel on the wall.

We stopped in front of: " *Is not general incivility the very essence of love?"*

"This is one of my favorite quotes from the book," I told him, using our intertwined hands to point toward the wall.

"I know," he said, "It's one of mine too."

"You've read it?"

Sam gave me a sheepish smile. "I read it nonstop for like two days so I wouldn't be completely clueless when I brought you here. And, I wanted to read it because you love it so much."

My heart warmed at his words and I'm sure my face did too. When he acted like this, all I wanted was for him to be mine. I was done with this weird, in between relationship we had going on. I wanted all of him. My heart stuttered at the thought of what I was about to do, but I didn't let it stop me.

"Sam," I started, "I want to–"

"Woah, wait," he stopped me, holding up the object he had in his other hand. I had nearly forgotten about it. "Don't ruin my plan."

I rolled my eyes. "Your plan?"

"Here," he said, shoving the object toward me. "I got this for you."

I let go of Sam's hand to open the gift. Once the paper was torn away, it took me a moment to realize what it was.

"Holy shit," I breathlessly cursed, looking up from the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* to give Sam a wide eyed stare, "This is first edition."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, it cost me a pretty penny and an entire nights sleep bidding for it."

"Thank you," I said, placing a kiss on his cheek. "You didn't have to do this. It's too much–"

"It's not enough," Sam interjected.

Before I could argue, Sam continued.

"A way of showing someone you love them is taking interest in their interests," Sam explained. "So I took some interest in *Pride and Prejudice.* I'm not going to lie, I actually kind of like it."

I chuckled. "It's good right?"

Sam nodded in agreement.

I was overwhelmed with feelings at that moment. The love I felt for him, the love *from* him, was making me happier than I had felt in what seemed like forever.

"So the next part of my plan is asking you if you'd like to make this official and be my boyfriend?" Sam asked with a shy, yet self-assured smile.

I let out a short laugh before throwing myself at him and capturing his lips in a kiss. I made sure to launch everything I was feeling at him with the kiss. I gave him my love, my desire, my comfort, my appreciation. This love was something that was once in a life time. It was something I would never feel for anyone else, nor would I ever want to.

He was it for me. Sam was my person. And he made me a better me.

"So I'll take that as a yes?" Sam teased as he pulled away briefly.

I rolled my eyes and smacked his uninjured shoulder with the book.

"Yes it's a yes, jerk," I replied before capturing his lips with mine once again.

I was no longer a shadow, but was now a my own bright light next to my shining Knight.

**

*****PLEASE READ*****
Just some clarification because a lot of people seem to be confused: The "Tinder guy" is Jack which is Mae's younger brother who is in his first year of college. Not Jake who is Sam's friend.

Thank you so much for reading!!!! This is officially the last chapter of Knight!

Thanks to everyone whether you've been reading since the beginning or just started it. I appreciate all the support!

Please tell me your thoughts on the chapter, the story as a whole, your favorite parts, favorite characters, least favorite characters, anything!!!!

Be on the look out for the Epilogue coming sometime next week!

Epilogue

Mason Maloney

My legs were wobbly when I finally stepped out of the car. Sitting in there for the entire drive from Massachusetts to Florida, except for a few bathroom breaks, was enough to make my legs forget how to walk for a few moments.

"Is this your building?" Dad asked as he got out of the car, Mom following. He pointed straight ahead to one of the residential buildings in the area.

"I don't know," I said with a shrug, squinting to try and see the name of the building. "Sam said he would meet us out here, but I haven't heard from him. He might still be at practice."

"Hey!" a voice loudly called out. I turned to see Pete making his way over to us, his parents following behind him. "Is this it?"

I shrugged. "Where's Bell?"

"She went off to her building. She wanted to get there before her roommate," he replied, looking around at the buildings that surrounded us.

Our parents started talking with each other while Pete and I watched other students dragging their things through the parking lot to the residential buildings.

"Have you seen Ross?" I asked Pete as we watched a guy drop his suitcase.

Pete laughed loudly at him and I smacked his shoulder to shut him up.

"No, I haven't seen him," Pete denied.

As if he heard us talking about him, Ross cane walking down from a long walkway that led to the parking lot from one of the residential buildings.

"Hey!" he called out. "Did you guys just get here?"

Pete immediately walked over to Ross while I motioned for our parents to follow.

"Did you see Sam and Christo yet?" I questioned Ross when we reached him.

Ross rolled his eyes. "Hello to you too Mase. No, I haven't seen them yet."

Ignoring Ross, I looked around the parking lot, hoping to see my boyfriend lurking around. Luckily for me, my eyes finally found him. He looked disheveled as if he was rushing. When his eyes met mine, a beaming smile broke out onto his face and I went running toward him, dropping my bags on the ground.

I launched myself at him with full force, causing him to stumble back a bit when he caught me. My legs wrapped around his waist as his arms clung to mine and I started kissing all over his face.

"I missed you!" I exclaimed, kissing his face between each word.

Sam chuckled, his smile so wide there were wrinkles by his eyes.

"I missed you so much, Mase," Sam confessed, placing a chaste kiss on my lips.

"Did you miss me too?" Pete's voice called out, causing us to pull apart. I put my feet back down on the ground and gave Pete an annoyed look.

"I missed Ross, not you," Sam teased.

"Rude," Pete muttered.

An excited yell from behind me grabbed my attention. I turned around to see Christo sprinting toward us with a look of glee on his face. He raced past Sam and me and headed straight for Ross, throwing his arms around him which caused Ross to let out a laugh and stumble backwards.

"Well, I guess it's clear who Christo missed," Pete commented with a scoff.

I shook my head and turned back to Sam, looking up at him with a smile. His time down in Florida had done him well. His once pale skin now had a golden tan and his hair was slightly lighter on top from the sun.

Sam pulled away from me and went over to greet my parents, giving each of them a hug.

"Do you want to go see the suite?" Sam asked, looking around at all of us.

Following Sam, we all trekked up to the resident building where there were a ton of other college freshmen scurrying around the halls. A lot of them seemed to be student athletes, like Sam and Christo. The only reason we were able to get an apartment our first year was because the athletes and honors students get first picks on the rooms and move in early. If I wasn't dating Sam, I'd be stuck in one of the first year halls.

Once we were up the stairs and at the room, Sam opened the door to reveal the apartment. It wasn't took big, the living room and kitchen split as one room, but it was perfect for us. There were four bedrooms that housed a pair of us, two on one side and two on the other.

"Wow, this is actually pretty nice," my dad commented as he stepped in the room and placed one of my bags down.

"Yeah, it's pretty cozy," Sam replied with a smile.

"Have you met our other roommates?" I asked him.

"Yeah, they're on the team. They're not here right now though," Sam said.

I figured as much.

Sam motioned for my parents and I to follow him before leading us to our shared bedroom. There was a bed on each side of the room. Sam's side was already littered with his things, but it was still pretty neat.

"Uh oh, I can already tell you two are going to be pushing these beds together," Dad said, sharing a look with my mother.

"Dad," I hissed in a warning tone to which Sam just chuckled.

"What? Don't act like I'm wrong," Dad shot back. My cheeks tinged in embarrassment as I crossed my arms over my chest.

Sam teasingly pinched my cheek causing me to jerk my head back at his touch.

"No need to be embarrassed, Mase," Mom started, placing her arm around me. "You're an adult and you're going to adult decisions. Just be smart about it."

"Oh my God," I uttered, shaking my head and turning to Sam, "Please make this stop," I said to him.

"Let me help you move your stuff in," Sam offered, changing the subject.

It took us a while, but we finally got all of my things from my parents' car up to the apartment. I wasn't going to worry about organizing everything until later. And I *definitely* wasn't going to push the beds together until after my parents were gone.

***

My parents left later that night after taking Sam and me out for dinner. After they had left, I met my other three roommates who were all on Sam's team. Rudy was sharing a room with Christo beside mine and Sam's room while Marco and Jaden shared the room beside Pete and Ross's.

"Dude, Sam was so anxious for you to get here," Rudy told me as we sat in the living room. The other guys were watching TV, not paying attention to our conversation.

I chuckled and looked over at my boyfriend's focused expression before turning back to Rudy.

"It was hard to be apart for so long."

My words caught Sam's attention and he turned to look at the two of us, throwing his arm around my shoulder.

"What are you saying about me?" Sam asked in an accusatory tone.

"Don't worry about it, dude," Rudy told him with a chuckle.

Sam narrowed his eyes at him before looking over to me.

"Yeah, dude. Don't worry about it," I mimicked with a laugh of my own.

"Don't keep secrets from me," Sam complained in a whiny tone, pulling me closer to him.

I place my lips on his pouty ones before pulling back to smile at him.

"I was just saying I love you and it was hard to be apart from you while you were here for football," I told him, causing his face to glow.

"I love you too."

And at that moment, I couldn't wait for what the future brought us.

***

Three months later, the day before Thanksgiving

Sam Knight

Mason was rushing around the apartment, cleaning up for the arrival of his brother. Since I couldn't go home for Thanksgiving, and neither could Nathan, we decided to stay here and Nathan, Tony, and Jake would stay with us for their days off from practice. Mason was worried we wouldn't have enough space or enough food, but I didn't think his brother would mind it too much. I was betting he didn't live much better than we did.

Our apartment was by no means big, but we would be able to fit three other people for the next three days.

"Shit!" Mason cursed, causing me to look over at him from the couch.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I'm going to be late picking up Nathan from the airport," Mason replied, pulling on the ends of his hair. "I still have so much stuff to do before they get here."

"I can go pick them up," I offered, though I slightly regretted it after I said it. I was originally going to allow Mason to take my car to the airport to pick the guys up, but when he looked as stressed out as he did, I couldn't sit here and do nothing about it.

Mason shot me an appreciative glance. "Will you?"

I nodded and stood up, giving him a peck on the lips. "Of course, I will."

Mason sent me a wide smile before going back to what he was doing before.

I dragged myself to our shared room to grab my car keys before heading out of the apartment and toward the airport. As I drove around the parking lot of the airport, I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of the low music coming from the speakers.

As I continued my drive around, my phone suddenly started ringing. I answered it without looking to see who it was.

"Hello?"

"You here yet?" Jake snapped. "Mason texted Nate and told him you were coming."

I mentally cheered as I finally found an empty space.

"Yeah, I'm just parking the car," I answered before shutting it off and getting out to head inside the airport. "I'll go meet you inside."

"Okay we're near a fountain with a bunch of palm trees that I'm not sure are real or fake," Jake told me.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, I'll be in there in a minute."

With that I hung up the phone and made my way inside. It didn't take me long to find the guys and Jake was quick to spot me.

"Please tell me you have food at the apartment," Jake said as a greeting when he saw me.

I stopped in front of him with an unimpressed look. "Pete and Christo live there. If we didn't have food, they would never shut up about it."

"Aw, I kinda miss little Chrissy," Jake said in a teasing tone.

A moment later, Nathan and Tony made their way over to us. Nathan gave me a small nod as a greeting while Tony was a lot friendlier with his wide smile.

"You guys ready to go?" I asked.

The four of us started our way out of the airport. I was walking ahead of the others until Nathan caught up to me. The two of us walked side by side in silence until he finally spoke up.

"Thanks for picking us up," he said after clearing his throat.

"No problem," I quickly replied. "Mase was stressing so I figured I'd give him one less thing to worry about."

Nathan nodded but didn't say anything else.

"So, you're season's going good," I started to end the silence between us, "I watched your highlights the other night. That game against Auburn was sick."

Nathan seemed surprised at my statement, but he didn't let the shock remain on his face for long.

"Yeah, thanks man," he replied with a small smile. "I saw some of your game against UConn. Looks like that shoulder's holding up."

I smiled back at him. "Never been better."

"Good. Maybe we'll be seeing each other in bowl season," Nathan said as we reached the car.

Once we got to the car, Jake took his spot in the passenger's seat, leaving his bag with Tony to put it in the trunk. The traffic was a little heavy on the way back to school, but we managed to make it back in about half an hour.

"What was Mase so stressed about?" Nathan asked as I lead them up to our apartment.

"He's been cleaning the place for you guys, doesn't want you to think we're dirty or something," I replied with a shrug to which Nathan gave me a strange look.

"I wouldn't blame Mason for the place being dirty, I know what Christo's like," Tony said with a laugh.

I laughed along with him as I unlocked the door to the apartment. Instantly, we were met at the door by Christo who greeted his cousin with a yell and a hug. I stepped aside to give Jake and Nathan room to enter the apartment.

"Nate!" Mason exclaimed, exiting our bedroom. He threw his arms around his brother and Nathan dropped his bag on the floor to return the favor.

I looked back over to Christo to see that he was now hanging onto Jake who looked as if he was a second away from shoving him.

"Okay, so our other roommates are home for Thanksgiving so they said you guys could sleep in their room," Mason told his brother once he released him. "I figured Tony could sleep in Rudy's bed and share the room with

Christo and Nathan and Jake could take Marco and Jaden's room," Mason finished, looking toward me.

Mason stepped away from his brother to show the guys where they would be staying and told them about our plans for tomorrow.

***

The next day

Mason had gotten up early on Thanksgiving morning to start cooking. I had gotten up soon after and tried to help him. Key word being tried. It didn't go over so well and now I was banished to the couch to stay out of his way.

The rest of the guys were up a little later and we sat in front of the TV watching football while Mason continued cooking. I sat on the couch with Nathan and Jake while Pete and Ross took the chairs on either side of the couch and Tony and Christo pulled up chairs from the kitchen.

It was about noon time when there was banging on the apartment door.

"Open up," Bella's shrill voice sounded through the door.

"Can you get that, Sam?" Mason asked me from the kitchen.

I looked to Pete who kept his eyes glued on the TV.

"Aren't you going to get the door for your girlfriend?" I asked him, irritation in my tone.

Pete just waved me off without a word.

I sighed and stood up from the couch before opening the apartment door to reveal Bella standing there in a cute red dress, holding a glass dish covered in tin foil.

"Don't you look cute," I told her, stepping aside so she could walk in.

"Thank you kind gentleman," she replied, sending a glare over to Pete. "At least there's one gentleman in this place," she said loudly, placing her dish down on the counter.

Pete glanced over at her. "Yeah, yeah. You look pretty, Bell. Come here."

"No, I'm going to help Mase finish cooking since you're all too busy gluing your eyes to the TV," Bella responded with an eye roll, walking over to greet Mason in front of the stove.

Pete just shrugged and turned his attention back to the television.

Before I had time to sit down, Mason let out a loud curse. My head immediately whipped to look toward him, worried he had hurt himself.

"What happened?" I asked, scurrying over to him. "Did you burn yourself?"

"No. I ran out of salt! Who the hell runs out of salt?" Mason exclaimed with a groan.

"I'm sure it'll be fine, we don't need–"

Mason's glare cut off my words. Okay, so we needed salt.

I sighed. "I guess I could try to find an open store and get some."

Mason's glare transformed to a smile. "Thank you!" He placed a long kiss on my cheek before turning back to the stove.

"Okay, I guess I'm going to the store," I announced to the guys in the living room. Most of them didn't even pay attention, but Nathan did.

"I'll go with you," Nathan offered, standing up from the couch.

I tried not to show him my shock or apprehension. Nathan and I texted sometimes, but we never hung out alone together. The only times we were together in a social setting, Mason was with us.

"Are you sure?" Mason asked his brother as he stirred something on the stove.

Nathan rolled his eyes. "We'll be fine."

And with that, the two of us headed out of the apartment and to my car.

"Can you look up some places that are open today?" I asked him as I started the car up.

"There's a Walmart open five miles from here," Nathan told me, still looking down at his phone.

"Perfect."

Nathan put the directions on his phone and the two of us stayed quiet throughout the ride as we listened to the GPS.

The store wasn't busy when we got there. There were a few people like us who were there for forgotten Thanksgiving items, but other than that the store was pretty much empty.

"Where would they keep salt in this place?" Nathan asked as we started looking around.

"With the food," I answered.

He rolled his eyes. "No shit."

"You asked," I said in defense.

Nathan and I walked aimlessly around the food aisles, but we saw no sign of the salt anywhere.

"Should we ask someone?" I whispered as an employee walked by us.

" *I'm* not asking anyone. I'd rather look around this store for hours than ask someone for help," Nathan replied, starting to walk back up the aisle.

I sighed, glaring at the back of his head and followed him. If Mason was here, he'd say Nathan's words were "such a man thing to say."

"Hey," I called out as I caught up with him. "Why did you even come with me?"

Nathan continued looking up and down at the shelves, seemingly ignoring me. I was about to ask him again when he finally replied.

"I just wanted to hang out. You know, do my part with this whole truce thing," he told me, looking over at me briefly.

I didn't know what to think about his words.

"I just think Mason wants us to be friendlier with each other I guess, I don't know," Nathan continued.

"Did he tell you that?"

"No. I just *know* ," he said. "We're twins. He doesn't *have* to tell me anything. I can just tell."

"You didn't know it was me who he was dating for a while," I pointed out with my eyebrows raised.

Nathan narrowed his eyes at me. "Shut up."

That must still be a sore subject.

"Found it!" Nathan exclaimed, snatching the salt from the top shelf and holding it in front of my face. "Make sure Mason knows I was the one that found it."

I snorted out a laugh. "Fine. If it's that important to you..."

Nathan sent me a smug smile as the two of us walked out of the aisle and toward the check out area.

By the time we got back to the apartment, Ross, Christo, and Tony were setting up a table in the middle of the room. Christo took the desk chairs out of his room to set them up at the table with the other kitchen chairs.

"We still need three more chairs," Christo told me as soon as he spotted me.

Nathan walked over to Mason to hand him the salt.

"Fine, I'll get the ones out of my room and Ross can get one out of his," I said, setting my keys down on the counter before heading to my room for the chairs.

Once Mason had the salt, he was able to finish up the meal while I helped Bella set the table with plates and silverware. When we were done with that, I made my way over to Mason and have him a kiss on the top of the head.

"Everything smells amazing," I complimented.

"It better be amazing. I worked hard on this," he replied, leaning into me.

"You did. And we all appreciate it," I told him truthfully.

Eventually, all the food was done and Bella and I helped Mason put it all out on the table. Everyone took their seats an we began digging in.

"Mase, everything came out great," Nathan told his brother who gave him an appreciative smile. I nodded in agreement, placing a kiss on Mason's cheek.

"I'm so glad you guys came," Mason said, mostly to his brother.

I knew beforehand, Mason wasn't too keen on Jake coming along with Nathan and Tony. After what happened, he had a hard time moving on from what Jake had done that almost ruined our relationship. However, I knew deep down Mason knew we couldn't place all the blame for that on Jake.

"Thanks for having us," Tony kindly replied from beside Christo on the other side of the table.

"It's like we're a weird little messed up family," Bella added, looking fondly over at Pete.

We laughed at her words and continued eating.

"So, anything new with you guys?" Mason asked, looking toward Nathan, Tony, then Jake.

A small smile made its way onto Nathan's face before he snuck a look over at Jake. That action caused the whole table to look at Jake and he shot a nasty glare toward Nathan.

" *Nate* ," Jake hissed.

The only one who didn't look confused was Tony who looked down at his plate with a smile that matched Nathan's.

"Are you guys keeping secrets?" Christo accused, poking his cousin in the arm.

"I can't say..." Tony replied, still smiling down at his plate.

I shared a confused look with Mason before the two of us stared over at Jake.

Jake groaned and shot another glare at Nathan before addressing the table.

"Fine, I'll tell you. I fu–"

"Woah, you don't have to tell them if you don't want to," Nathan stopped him. "I just don't have a good poker face."

"Fuck off, Nate. I don't care if they know," Jake replied with an eye roll.

"What's going on Jakey? Are you okay? Are you having trouble at school?" Christo asked leaning over as if he was going to hug Jake, but he pushed him off.

"Don't call me that," Jake warned Christo with a scowl.

"Then what is it?"

Jake sighed and then casually said, "I fuck guys now."

My eyes bugged out of my head as I took in Jake's words. Jake was honestly one of the last people I expected to say that, but I guess you couldn't judge a book by its cover.

" *What?"* Mason screeched.

Nathan loudly laughed at Mason's reaction, throwing his head back and resting his hand on his stomach.

"Wow, did not expect that," Bella said, sharing a look with Ross who nodded in agreement.

"When did that happen?" Christo asked in a loud tone.

"His first college party was pretty crazy," Tony answered with a chuckle.

"It's been that long and you haven't said anything?" I asked Jake.

"You didn't tell me you were fucking a dude for a while and you also didn't tell me how good it was," Jake shot back.

"Okay, I don't want to hear about Sam and my brother like that," Nathan interjected with a warning look.

"Well, this conversation has been interesting," Mason spoke up.

"Tell me about it," Jake muttered.

"I can't believe my best friends keep stuff like this from me," Christo added in disbelief. "Ross, do you have anything to say?"

Ross looked at Christo with a confused look. "No?"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

After that, the conversation of Jake's new sexual adventures ended. When we were done eating, everyone helped clean up the table and then we went back to the living room to watch some football.

Later on in the evening, Mason curled up next to me in bed and placed his head on my chest.

"It was nice having the guys here, even Jake," Mason said, his warm breath brushing against my bare skin.

"Yeah it was," I agreed. "Maybe we should make a tradition out of this."

Mason nodded and hummed in agreement. "I'd love that."

"Me too," I replied, kissing the top of his head.

I wanted to have so many traditions with Mason throughout my entire life. I loved him and the thought of our future together.

And hopefully one day, I could make him a Knight.

**

Okay, so *now* Knight is officially over! I just want to thank everyone who has ever read, commented, or voted on this book. Your support means the absolute world to me. Writing books is hard, but when you have people supporting you, it makes it feel so much easier, so thank you!!!! This is the first book I have ever finished that I'm truly proud of, so I'm sad that it's over, but also so happy that I can say that I finished it. I know it seems like it didn't take that long for it to finish since the updates were frequent, but *so much* went into this book before I even published the first chapter. I had been working on this for months, trying to get the plot and characters straightened out, before anyone other than me had read a word of it. There were times I thought I was never going to publish this because I literally have so many books in my drafts that I have started and I see them going

nowhere. I'm glad I saw this one through and got it done and I'm glad so many people enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it. So thank you again!!!!

As I've said before, there will be bonus chapters coming out afterwards so make sure you keep this book in your library or reading list so you don't miss out!

Also, I've had people ask me to do a Q&A so if you want to ask me questions about literally anything, the book, the characters, writing in general, life in general, go ahead and comment here and I'll try to get that done some time.

AND I do have another book on my profile called "On Thin Ice" so go check that out as it will start updating this month.

And as always, please let me know what you think!!!!

Thank you!!!!

Fun Facts

1. When I first started drafting the story, Nathan's name was actually going to be Malcolm, but after I started writing I thought Nathan and Mason sounded more complementary as twin names.

2. Jonah and Mae didn't exist originally. Sam was going to be an only child living with his parents and he needed to get a job because his parents couldn't afford to send him to college.

3. Miles was going to be Jonah and Mae's newborn baby, but I changed it so he was older.

4. Originally, Bella was going to end up with Nathan.

5. After I came up with the idea of Sam's mom being in prison, it was going to be for killing someone in a drunk driving accident, but I wanted the crime to be something more redeemable.

6. The Knights were going to win the championship at first.

7. Christo was going to be very minor and not find out about Sam and Mason until later when everyone else did.

8. Knight wasn't supposed to be the title of the book. I just put it as a placeholder until I thought of something else and I never did.

9. Bella's dream about the bees attaching themselves to her is a dream I actually had.

10. I drafted almost this entire story before publishing anything. It took me a little less than a year to finish drafting before I started posting it.

Q&A

Thank you so much for all of your questions! For questions that I got asked more than once, I answered them at the bottom

Q: how do you keep the motivation to write?

A: I don't really do a specific thing to motivate me. Sometimes I don't feel motivated at all and then all of a sudden I'll get an idea and write it down. I think it helps to plan the plot out ahead of time. I find that if I know how the story is going to end when I start writing it, it's much easier to keep writing. It's a lot harder to feel motivated when you don't know what's going to happen. Last year at school when I was writing it, I used to go buy myself a burrito and an iced coffee and then sit at my desk and write for a little while and looked forward to that so that kept me motivated!

Q: If they have kids, what kind of parents would sam and mason be?

A: I think Mason would be a loving, yet worrisome parent. I think he would be the more "maternal" one for lack of better word, while Sam would be more chill, yet fiercely protective.

Q: Which writers inspire you the most? And did their books make an impact on Knight?

A: A lot of my ideas are actually inspired by songs/narratives in songs rather than books. I do a lot of reading on here to help me with my writing style, but I don't typically take plot inspiration from other books. It's hard for me to even pinpoint specific writers because my writing style is developed from every piece of literature I've ever read. I'm sure some things I've read have unconsciously made an impact on Knight though.

Q: Are you single? Is that even a valid question?

A: Yes to both!

Q: How do you deal with writer's block/not knowing where to go with the book?

A: When I have writer's block, I find the best way to get out of it is to do some reading and step out of the world you're trying to write for a little while. When you just stare at your blank page, it just tends to get frustrating. So I will either go read something, write something else that I DON'T have writer's block for (I literally have so many things in my drafts that I've written that I'll probably never finish because it was just one spark of inspiration). It's best to just stop thinking so hard about what you're trying to write. Try writing in a different place than you usually do. One of my favorite pieces of advice I've gotten about writer's block is to write something that you will almost definitely take out of the story, like kill the main character, write a scene from someone else's point of view, or something so bizarre that it just gets your creativity flowing.

Q: What does Mason/ Sam like about each other?

A: I think Mason likes Sam's confidence and the way he makes him feel. The confidence Sam has rubs off on Mason and I think it makes him feel more assured/better about himself. He feels comfortable and safe with Sam. I think he also likes Sam's passion. Sam likes seeing Mason come out of his shell more. He likes fully being able to be himself around him and likes that Mason helps bring out his confidence.

Q: Whose top and bottom?

A: They talk about this in Chapter 24. Mason bottoms.

Q: How did Jake realize his sexuality?

A: He met a guy at his first college party. I plan to write a bonus chapter about this so stay tuned!

Q: Can we get an extra for Christo and a love interest?

A: I could definitely try to think of something for a bonus chapter.

Q: Do you have any suggestions on any books that are as good as Knight?

A: As I was looking for stories to suggest after reading this question, I found out that my absolute favorite book isn't on here anymore so I'm really upset about that!

My other favorites that are absolutely incredible are:

Nathaniel Jean's Senior Year by stayonbrand

Playing the Straight Game by ritest

The Sound of Ice by MAndALaptop

Blaze by SuperheroesAndSprite

Liar Liar by midnighteenx

Q: What's your favorite (non-Wattpad) book? Who's it by and why do you like it?

A: Outside of Wattpad, I don't typically read romance books (other than *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights* if you consider that romance). I like character oriented books. (character > plot all the way).

With that being said some of my favorite books and characters are:

The Haunting of Hill House by Shirley Jackson. I know this is a series now, but I haven't watched it. I love this book mainly because of what the main

character, Eleanor, represents. Eleanor is a symbol for freedom and independence. I love all of the symbolism in this story from the House itself, to the doors. If you like reading symbolic books with a pretty good main character (who is also a symbol) give this one a read.

Jaws by Peter Benchley. I'll admit, I saw the movie first. It's one of my favorite movies of all time and I've been watching it since I was a little kid. I didn't read the book until much later in my life. I like it because it's an easy read, as in it's not hard to get through, and it's very descriptive. There's lots of symbolism in this one too. The book and the film are both pretty allegorical as anti-capitalist. Also, who doesn't love Quint and Chief Brody?

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen. I love Elizabeth Bennett. I love a good haters to lovers trope. Elizabeth is a pretty dynamic character with some cool character development, along with Mr. Darcy. As their development progresses, they become more self-aware and it's refreshing. Also, the book is pretty humorous at times.

What I'm reading now: *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott

Q: Do you listen to music when you write?

A: I listen to music sometimes when I write. It just depends on how my head is at the time. Sometimes I can write a whole chapter listening to music, other times it's too distracting and I can't even write a coherent sentence.

Q: Who's older Mason or Nathan and when are everyone's birthdays?

A: Nathan is older, but only by a few minutes. Honestly, I didn't think of their birthdays, but I think Sam is an Aries so I'm going to say his birthday is March 29. And I think Mason and Nathan are Cancers so I'll make their birthday June 23.

Q: Christo's sexuality?

A: Ambiguous on purpose!

Q: What is your college major?

A: I am a Crime & Justice Studies major! No, it is not the same thing as Criminal Justice, that's only part of it. It's basically a mixture of Criminal Justice, Criminology, and Justice studies.

Q: Nathan, Christo, Ross's sexuality?

A: I do want to leave everyone's sexuality up to interpretation. I don't think there needs to necessarily be a label for everyone. Even Sam doesn't really label himself.

Q: What's your favorite chapter?

A: Because I like drama and sad chapters, my favorite is probably chapter 41 when Mason goes to Sam's house and hears them talking about the pictures. I like when books make me *feel* something, like actually make me get a gut-wrenching or heartbreaking feeling, so if I was a reader that would probably be my favorite and as the writer it's my favorite because it hurt me to write it.

Q: Is Nathan going to get a happy ending? Is he going to find someone to love and someone who will love him?

A: I think Nathan is going to go through the motions and remain focused on football throughout college. He's going to have his ups and downs, but in the end, I think he will be fine. He's such a complex character and I wish I delved into him more, so maybe I'll write some bonus chapters about him. I think eventually he will fall in love, but it might not be in college.

Q: Who's your favorite character and your favorite line/action of that character?

A: Asking me to pick my favorite character is like asking me to pick my favorite child. It's so hard for me to pick, but when I'm reading, I tend to like problematic characters (lol). So I like Nathan and Bella even though they're not everyone's favorite. Part of the reason I really like problematic characters is because I *love* if they get a redemption and show that they're multi-dimensional people and not just there to antagonize. So my favorite action from Bella was when she stood up for Mason the day after the pictures went out and my favorite action by Nathan was when he talked to Sam after the game and agreed to the truce, and encouraged Mason and Sam to get back together.

Q: Did you ever imagine another ending?

A: I could have, but I don't really remember. I'm pretty much imagined the ending of this book from the very beginning when I was planning the book out. I always knew that I wanted Sam and Mason to end up together in the end because I hate reading books where the two don't end up together. I know it's not realistic for every couple in high school to end up together, but I read and write to escape reality so I like my happy endings!

Q: Are you satisfied with the overall book or are there things you wish you could change?

A: Generally speaking, I'm satisfied because I finished the book. There were times I thought I would never finish and I have so many unfinished works in my drafts that will never see the light of day. I'll probably never be truly satisfied with the book, or any book I write, as a whole because there is always room for improvement. There are characters in this book that I wish I gave more attention to and story lines that I wanted to flesh out more. There are parts of the book where I wish I put in more detail. I don't

think I'll ever look at any of my works as perfect or be 100% satisfied with them, but I love this book and I'm proud of myself for finishing it.

Q: Did you ever picture this much engagement/views on your book?

A: In an idealized part of my mind I pictured the book getting a good amount of reads, but I never expected it to actually happen. I never thought for sure that it was ever going to end up popular or touch people the way it did. I thought maybe I'd end up with a few thousand views, most of them being from me, and maybe a few hundred votes and comments by the end of it, but I NEVER expected all the love I got. I'm so thankful for everyone who gave this book a chance and read it while it was still ongoing because I know how much people hate doing that (I do too). Never in a million years did I think I would end up with over a million reads so THANK YOU!!!!

ANSWER TO ALL QUESTIONS REGARDING ROSS AND CHRISTO'S RELATIONSHIP:

I don't want to disappoint anybody, but my intention with them was to make them close friends. That doesn't mean you can't ship them. I actually love how people have been shipping them. This friendship had been planned from when I was drafting the story and Jake's revelation about his sexuality was planned as well. So I don't want anyone to think that I'm just not giving you what you want or baiting you because this was already predetermined.

ANSWER TO ALL QUESTIONS REGARDING A SEQUEL/SPIN-OFF

As of right now, there are no plans for a sequel or a spin-off. The reason for that is because I really have no inspiration to do either of those things. Writing books is hard so it really only works when you have the inspiration and motivation for it. I've been writing in this world for so long, I need to write in another one for a while to keep my inspiration and motivation alive. This is why I prefer bonus chapters because that way I can get inspiration for one chapter and don't have to worry about constructing a whole new story/plot or worry about dragging a story out that should've just stayed how it was. This doesn't mean there will never be a sequel, it just means for now it's not something I'm thinking about.

**

Thank you so much for the questions!!! Be on the lookout for Bonus chapter 1 coming out very soon ;)

Bonus | 01

Freshman year of college, spring semester

Sam Knight

Mason screaming in my face was doing nothing to soothe my pounding headache. In fact, it was just making it worse.

"Can we talk about this later?" I stupidly asked, causing steam to come out of Mason's ears.

"Talk about it later? Talk about the fact that you let some girl dance all over you last night *later?* " he screeched. The loud volume made me bring my hands up to hold my head.

This was why I didn't drink. I did stupid shit and then got punished with a killer hangover. It really wasn't worth it.

"It was nothing, Mase," I tried to assure him, but it only made him angrier.

He stood in front of me with his hands on his hips while I sat down on our bed.

"It wasn't nothing, Samuel!" he exclaimed.

Here we go with the full name.

"I was drunk and I don't even remember it," I truthfully told him, rubbing my temples.

"That's not an excuse," Mason hissed.

I groaned and threw myself back on the bed.

"It was just dancing, Mason," I let out with a heavy sigh.

Mason sent me a look of disgust before shaking his head and turning around to walk out of the room. I let out another groan and picked myself up out of bed, following him into the main area of our suite where Pete and Bella were watching TV.

"Can you chill please?" I questioned in a rude tone.

I wasn't in the mood to fight with him, but I didn't want him storming out on me either.

"No, I won't chill!" Mason fought back.

Pete and Bella just stared at us with strange expressions.

"It's not a big deal, Mase!" I exclaimed. "I don't know why you're so upset!"

Mason's face turned red and he looked as if he wanted to punch me.

"You don't understand why I'm mad at you for letting some girl grind all over you?" Mason spat. "I'm mad because that's basically cheating!"

His words caused my temper to flare and my anger soon matched his.

"No it's not!" I shouted. "And I'm pissed that you're even accusing me of that."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Pete stand and motion for Bella to follow him. The two of them left the common room and disappeared into Pete's and Ross's bedroom.

"And I'm pissed that you let some girl hang all over you!" Mason angrily responded.

The shouting caused my head to pound even more. I couldn't take this anymore. I needed to get out of here.

"Fine. If you're so mad at me, I'll just leave," I told him with a glare.

"Fine!"

And with that I was walking out of the suite, slamming the door behind me.

***

Mason Maloney

"So I take it Sam *didn't* like you confronting him about the party," Bella said as she walked out of Pete's room and sat down next to me on the couch.

I was still so angry from our fight, my breaths heavy and uneven.

"He's stupid," I complained. "So stupid."

Bella snorted out a laugh. "I could've told you that."

"And he thinks it's no big deal!" I ranted, throwing my hands up in the air. "As if he would be happy about me dancing around with someone else."

"He would throw a fit," Bella agreed with a nod. "Kind of like you are right now."

I glared at her. "That's rich coming from the Queen of throwing fits."

Bella held her hands up in defense, a smirk on her face. "Hey, I never said I didn't throw fits."

"Ain't that the truth," Pete said as he suddenly appeared, sitting down next to Bella and throwing his arm around her.

She leaned into his side and sent me a knowing look with her eyebrows raised.

"Am I wrong for being mad though?" I questioned. "Wouldn't you be?"

"Oh, I would be pissed," Bella replied. "I would throw the fit of all fits."

"Yes, she would," Pete responded with a nod. She sent him a glare to which he returned a sheepish smile and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek.

"Anyway, Sam will come to his senses eventually," Bella told me. "Just have to let him blow of some steam and knock his inflated ego down a bit."

I took a few deep breaths to try to subside my own anger. A few moments later, the door to the suite opened and my heart jolted at the thought of Sam coming back to apologize. My shoulders sagged in disappointment when I turned to see Ross and Christo entering the suite, each with a coffee in their hands.

"What's up with Sam?" Ross asked, pointing his thumb back toward the door as he walked over to us.

"Yeah, we just saw him storming out of the building. He didn't even look at us," Christo added as he followed Ross.

"Trouble in paradise for the perfect couple," Pete mumbled as he turned the TV back on.

I glared at him. "We are *not* a perfect couple."

Pete always said that about us because Sam and I fought way less than him and Bella. Sam and I still had our issues and arguments, we just didn't fight like those two. It didn't mean we were perfect.

"What did he do?" Ross wondered with a soft look on his face.

I groaned. "I don't want to talk about it."

It bothered me that Sam thought what he did wasn't a big deal. Letting some girl all over him, even though he was drunk and it meant nothing to him, was not okay. The fact that he was trying to brush it off instead of seeing why it was wrong was making it hard for me to even want to see him when he got back. It wasn't enough to make me want to break up with him, but I still didn't want to see him.

I let out another groan and stood up from the couch, getting ready to go back into my room.

"Do you want to go rant about our shitty boyfriends together?" Bella asked, looking up at me.

"Hey!" Pete exclaimed. "I'm not even being shitty today."

Bella smiled and placed a kiss on his lips. "I know."

I shook my head. "I'm just going to go to my room."

And with that, I turned on my heel and locked myself away in mine and Sam's bedroom.

After angrily sitting in my bedroom and then taking a nap, I woke up and left the room to find everyone was still in the common room except for Sam.

Noticing a few hours had passed since he left, I asked, "Has Sam been back yet?"

Ross shook his head. "I figured he'd be back by now, but he hasn't."

That was strange. Even when Sam got angry at me, he never left for more than a couple of hours. And when he wasn't mad at me, he would always tell me if he was going to be gone later than usual. It wasn't like him to disappear without trace.

I sighed. "I'm going to call him."

I walked into our kitchenette and leaned against the counter, pulling my phone out to dial Sam. I only reached his voicemail, causing me to let out a frustrated groan.

"Can one of you call him?" I called out to my friends. "He's not answering me."

Christo pulled out his phone and called Sam, but he go no further than I did.

That was when the panic started setting in. This wasn't like him. I knew deep in my heart that this wasn't like him.

"What if something's wrong?" I wondered, pacing the floor.

"I'm sure he's fine," Bella assured me.

"What if he's not?" I quickly replied. "What if something happened? You know he always answers me. Always."

"Give him a few minutes and see if he calls back," she suggested.

I gave him more than a few minutes. I gave him hours before I seriously started panicking. I called, and called, and called again, and I still got nothing. Eventually I gave up on him and started calling his football friends to see if they had seen him. They hadn't.

My heart rate was at an all time high as I thought of all of the terrible situations Sam could have gotten himself into.

I sat down on the couch, my head in my hands. "I'm going to freak out."

"Hey," Ross grabbed my attention, placing his hand on my shoulder. "Come on. We can go look around for him."

That was all he had to say for me to be up and following him out of the suite.

Sam was okay. He *had* to be okay.

***

Sam Knight

Driving my ass to the airport and using Jonah's credit card to buy a round trip plane ticket to Louisiana wasn't my best decision. Arriving unannounced at Nathan Maloney's doorstep was an even worse decision.

But there I was, standing outside Nathan's on-campus apartment with nothing but my dead cell phone, my wallet, and the clothes on my back.

When I first arrived at LSU, I had no idea where I was going. Luckily, someone on campus recognized me from football and was able to direct me toward Nathan's apartment, where he lived with other football players including Jake and Tony.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I knocked on the door and waited. Part of me hoped Jake would answer so I could act like I was coming here to see him, but I wasn't. I was here for Nathan and I didn't even know why I wanted to confide in him. It wasn't like the two of us were close just because we were civil to each other now.

It only took a few moments for a confused Nathan Maloney to open the door. He blinked rapidly as if trying to figure out if this was a dream before giving me a skeptical look.

"What are you doing here?" Nathan asked me. There was no judgement in his tone, just confusion.

"I need to talk to you," I admitted in a serious tone.

"And you couldn't just call me?"

"I also needed to get away from your brother," I sheepishly added.

Nathan's eyes narrowed. "If you did something to him, you came to the wrong place."

"We got in a fight," I confessed with a sullen expression.

Nathan blankly stared at me for a moment before letting out a heavy sigh and moving aside so I could enter the apartment.

"Get in," he commanded lightly.

I stepped inside and looked around, fully expecting the place to be a mess. Instead, I was surprised at how well kept the place actually was. Maybe Nathan grew up a bit.

He led me over to the couch and the two of us sat down. We were in a comfortable silence for a few moments before I spoke up.

"Where is everyone?" I asked, noticing we were the only ones here.

"Jake is off doing God knows what with God knows who, and Tony's at his girlfriends place," he replied casually.

I just nodded and the two of us sat in silence again.

"So are you going to tell me what you and Mase fought about or are we just going to sit and enjoy each other's company?" Nathan asked in a snarky tone.

I rolled my eyes and let out a heavy sigh. "He's just overreacting. I needed to get out of there."

"What did you do?"

I glared at him. "I didn't do anything."

Nathan just gave me a knowing look, a smirk creeping onto his face.

"I know that's not true, you know that's not true, so you might as well just tell me what you did," he replied.

"I got drunk at a party last night and some girl danced all over me and Mase got pissed," I gave in.

Nathan nodded, looking at me with an understanding expression.

"I didn't even do anything with her," I continued. "But he freaked out on me." I leaned back in my seat, running my hand through my hair in frustration.

"Look," Nathan started, leaning forward toward me, "I know you think you didn't do anything, but Mason doesn't see it that way."

I groaned. "But I did–"

"Let me finish," Nathan interrupted, holding his hand up for me to stop, "You're QB 1, okay, that makes you the number one person people want to get with."

I sent him a look of confusion, urging him to continue.

"Girls want to get with you just to say that they've been with you, guys probably do too," Nathan continued. "I go through that here. People are so fake. They want to be associated with us because we're on TV once a week."

"Yeah, I guess," I agreed.

I went through my fair share of fake people throughout high school and now in college. Only it seemed worse now.

"And Mason *knows* people will try to get with you, regardless of whether you're in a relationship," Nathan explained further. "That's why he got so mad. Because he probably sees people constantly trying to get in your good graces and he doesn't want you to enable that."

I never thought I'd say this, but what Nathan was saying was actually making sense to me. He understood my situation better than anyone I knew and he understood Mason better than anyone.

I sighed, slapping my hands on my face. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"I know I'm right. Thanks for telling me though," Nathan smugly replied.

I sent him a sarcastic smile, leaning back on the couch and then staring up at the ceiling.

"Does Mason even know you're here?" Nathan asked in an accusatory tone.

I groaned, turning my head to face him. "No. I was going to call him when I landed, but my phone died."

Nathan gave me a look of annoyed disbelief. "You know he's probably going crazy wondering where you are."

"Yeah, I know," I told him with a scoff. "Can I use your phone?"

Nathan wordlessly pulled his phone out of his pocket and handed it over. I gave him an appreciative smile before getting up from the couch and walking over to the kitchenette for a bit of privacy.

Mason answered on the first ring, "Nate, I can't talk right now. I'm waiting for Sam to call."

"Mase, it's me," I apprehensively answered, getting ready for him to freak out at me.

"Sam?" Mason asked in shock. "Are you with Nathan right now? What the hell?"

"I came to see him," I quietly admitted. "I'm sorry I didn't call earlier. My phone is dead."

"Why the hell would you go all the way to LSU?" Mason demanded. He didn't sound as angry as he did before.

"I just wanted to talk to him. I didn't really think it through," I said, leaning against the counter.

"When will you be back?"

"My flight is tomorrow night."

Mason just hummed to let me know he heard me and we sat in a comfortable silence for a few moments.

"Mase?" I spoke up.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about earlier. You were right," I apologized. "I'll make it up to you. Promise."

"We can talk about it when you get back," he said, his voice not giving away how he felt at that moment.

"Alright," I sighed. "I love you. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I love you too."

When I was done on the phone with Mason, I headed back to the couch and handed it over to Nathan who was still seated in the same spot.

"Everything good?" he asked me, his eyebrow raised in question.

"He didn't scream at me, so that's a good sign," I breathed out a laugh.

Nathan chuckled and nodded in agreement just before the door to the apartment swung open and in cake Jake.

"Nate, I finally fucked Joe Foster," Jake enthusiastically announced, obviously not seeing I was there, as he walked over to the fridge and opened it.

"Great, I'm sure our company would love to hear all about it," Nathan sarcastically responded.

Jake whipped his head around with wide eyes and an alarmed look on his face. He settled down when he realized it was me and then fixed a look of shock on his face.

"Sam? What are you doing here?" Jake asked as he made his way over to me. "Mason kick you out?"

I rolled my eyes. "Funny."

"If you two are done, do you think he'd go for me?"

Jake was met by a hard punch on each shoulder, one from me and then another from Nathan.

"What the hell?" Jake complained, looking at each of us with a look of disbelief. "Not to date! Just a fuc–"

I narrowed my eyes at him in a deadly glare. "Don't even finish that sentence. I swear to god if you talk about him like that again I will beat the shit out of you."

Jake rolled his eyes. "Come on, Sammy. I'm just messing around."

"Sure you are."

"I'm so glad I'm not whipped over someone," Jake teased, leaning back in his seat.

Nathan rolled his eyes. "Don't act like you didn't chase after Joe Foster for an entire month."

I gave Jake a questioning look, my eyebrows raised.

He just waved Nathan off. "That's not the same thing. Now that I've had him, I'm satisfied."

"Sure..."

"And I'm sure he'll be the one crawling back for more," Jake said in a smug tone, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Nathan and I shared looks filled with a mixture of disgust and disbelief.

"So, Sammy," Jake started, "why'd Little Maloney kick you out?"

"I'm not talking about this with you," I told him in a stern tone.

"There must be something if you brought your ass all the way here," Jake reasoned, a knowing look on his face.

Jake would be no help in this situation, so there was no way I'd go to him for advice about it. He never even had a relationship last longer than a few days.

"He just missed me," Nathan joked.

"Yep, that's it. I just wanted to see Nathan so bad," I responded with a laugh.

Jake narrowed his eyes at us and stood up. "You two are so full of shit. I'm outta here."

"Gonna go crawl back to bed with Joe Foster?" Nathan called out as Jake walked toward the door.

Jake just put his middle finger up and walked out the door.

"He's so pleasant," I sarcastically commented.

Nathan hummed in agreement, nodding his head. Then, he stood up from the couch and motioned for me to follow him.

"Let's go get something to eat. I'm starving. I'll guest swipe you in," he said as I got up to follow him.

Nathan led me through campus, briefly greeting nearly everyone we walked past. I could tell he was a well-liked guy at this school.

Eventually, we got to the dining hall and Nathan swiped us both in. We grabbed our food and sat down and not five seconds later, two girls sat down at our table beside each of us.

"Hey, Nate, who's this?" the one sitting beside him asked. The girl beside me was staring at me with a coy smile.

"My brother's boyfriend so back off, Carla," Nathan said, looking toward the girl beside me.

"Damn!" Carla cursed while the girl across from her started hysterically laughing.

"She thought she had a shot," the girl said, nudging Nathan with her elbow.

I chuckled and glanced over at Carla. "I'm Sam."

"Sam, this is Lily and Carla," Nathan introduced us.

"We've heard about you Sam," Lily told me, leaning back in her seat.

I glanced at Nathan with a look of confusion.

"Yeah, I've told them how much I hate you," Nathan said.

I gave Nathan a deadpanned look while Lily slapped him lightly on the shoulder and shook her head.

"That's not true," Carla told me.

"No, we actually do hate each other," I confirmed and Nathan nodded in agreement.

"Enemies," he added.

The girls shared confused looks while Nathan and I looked at each other as we both started snickering.

"You guys are weird," Lily said while Carla hummed in agreement.

The two of us just laughed before continuing to eat our food while the girls talked at a quick pace. Suddenly, something caught Nathan's attention and he patted my hand that was laying on the table then signaled for me to look to my right.

"See the guy in the purple polo over there? The blond one?" Nathan asked in a hushed tone.

"Yeah?"

"That's Jake's Joe," he told me with a smirk. "He's on the swim team."

I discretely looked over at the guy Nathan was pointing out. He was taller and leaner than Jake. He definitely looked like he had a swimmer's body. I

just never suspected Jake would go for someone like him.

"Doesn't seem like his type," I commented, looking back toward Nathan.

Nathan scoffed. "Jake doesn't have a type. He likes everything, but he's been obsessed with that kid."

"Okay," Lily spoke up, "we're leaving. It was nice meeting you Sam."

Carla said something similar before the two girls got up from the table. Lily left a kiss on Nathan's cheek, causing his face to flush, before the two headed out.

"Girlfriend?" I asked with my eyebrows raised.

"No. More like, she has no boundaries," he replied, looking down at his plate. "I don't date."

"Okay..." I exaggeratedly trailed.

Nathan shot me a scowl but didn't say anything else.

Soon after, the two of us headed back to his apartment to watch TV.

Nathan let out a small chuckle as he looked down at his phone.

"Mason's texting me to check on you," he told me, looking up from his phone. "Wants to make sure you're not wasted I guess."

I rolled my eyes. "Tell him I'm fine."

"I'll tell him you're going crazy," Nathan teased as I sent him a warning look.

"Don't get me into more trouble than I already am."

It got late sooner than I would have liked so Nathan and I decided to go to sleep. He grabbed me an extra blanket and pillow before leaving me on the couch.

Not much later, Jake walked in. He tried to be quiet when he saw that I was on the couch, but he didn't succeed. His steps were heavy and the door slammed shut, causing him to let out a curse as he looked toward me.

"It's fine, I wasn't asleep," I told him.

"Nate hates when the door slams," Jake said in a hushed tone as he walked toward me. "I'm surprised he's not out here to rip me a new one."

Jake muttered something else under his breath before he left me to go to his bedroom. Soon enough I was off in a dreamless sleep.

***

"So you know what to do, right?" Nathan asked as he drove me to the airport the next day.

"What do you mean?"

He rolled his eyes while shaking his head, obviously fed up with me.

"You know how to make Mason forgive you? Jesus Sam. Are you that dumb?"

That remark earned him a smack on the shoulder.

"You're going to take him on a date and tell him that you were wrong and he was right," Nathan said slowly. "Anything he says, agree with him and you'll be fine."

"I got it," I assured him. "I don't think he's that mad anymore anyway."

"Oh, he is," he said. "He was just relieved yesterday when he found out you weren't dead. I would prepare for him to be pissed when he sees you."

"You're not really helping right now," I said, shooting him a glare.

"Oh, sorry. Am I not the one driving you to the airport right now?" Nathan sarcastically remarked.

We pulled up to the airport not long after and I sighed before getting out of the car. Nathan rolled the window down and I stared at him expectantly.

"Have a safe flight and go make up with my brother," Nathan said in a stern tone.

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks for this weekend," I replied.

With that, Nathan and I waved to each other before I went into the airport. Soon enough I would be back in Florida.

***

It was late by the time I got back to school. Most of the students were still up since it was still technically the weekend and I had to check in with the RA on duty before I could go up to my room.

When I got to the suite, it was quiet. I assumed everyone who lived here was asleep since it was a Sunday night, but they could have been at the party I was hearing down the hall. I shut the door to the suite and stuck the key into my bedroom door. Mason opened it before I even had the chance to, "Hey," I said in a low tone.

Mason wrapped his arms around me and placed a long kiss on my cheek.

"I'm sorry," I said, returning his hug. "For everything. Especially leaving. I shouldn't have left like that."

"It's alright," Mason uttered. "I know I'm too much sometimes. I know you had to get away."

I pulled away from him slightly, my hands on his hips and gave him a confused look.

"You're not too much," I said.

Mason sent me a deadpanned look as if he thought I was lying to him.

"I freak out too easily. I know you needed to get away from me," Mason replied with a shrug.

"I did need to get away, but that wasn't because of how you reacted. It was because I didn't know how to deal with it. I was overwhelmed," I told him, pulling him closer to me.

Mason just nodded and placed his head on my chest.

"Besides, you were right to be angry," I confessed. "I just didn't want you to take it as a big deal because it meant nothing to me. I didn't think about how it would make you feel, but now I know and it will never happen again."

Mason looked up at me with a smile. "Okay."

"Nathan said I should take you on a date to make it up to you," I said with a chuckle.

Mason playfully rolled his eyes. "You don't need to do that. We're good."

"I kinda want to," I admitted. "Friday night?"

Mason's smile widened and he placed a kiss on my lips, mumbling against them, "Sounds great."

Before the kiss got too heated, my phone started ringing. I let out an exaggerated sigh before answering it.

"Hello?"

"Why the fuck is there a three hundred dollar charge on my credit card?"

Uh oh.

**

Here is the first bonus chapter! I hope you liked it. Sorry it took so long for me to get it up. School has made me more busy than I anticipated, so I haven't had much free time to write.

Please let me know what you think!

Bonus | 02

June, the summer before college

Mason Maloney

I was not an outdoorsy kind of guy, that was for sure. So when my parents broke the news that we were going to be staying in an old wooden cabin in the woods and called it "vacation" I wasn't too thrilled. The only thing that made it better was that they suggested Sam come along with us.

Being stuck in the back of the car in between Nathan and Sam for the four hour ride to the camp ground wasn't the most pleasing thing either. I was practically on top of Sam because Nathan was making it clear that he wanted his space as he spread out in his seat. I bit my tongue so I wouldn't start a fight in such a small space.

"Should we play a car game?" Mom asked, turning around to face us.

Nathan and I gave her matching looks of blank stares

"Can you guys act at least a little bit excited? This is going to be a fun trip!" Mom exclaimed.

"Not if we get eaten by a bear," Nathan muttered, looking out the window.

"We're not going to get eaten by a bear," Mom denied with a scoff. "I bet Sam wants to play a car game."

The three of us looked to Sam who put an awkward smile on his face.

"Sure, sounds great Mrs. Maloney," Sam replied, though he wasn't very convincing.

I rolled my eyes. "Don't do that to him, Mom."

"Wyoming!" Mom shouted out.

"What?"

"The license plate game," she responded. "You just call out the different states that you see."

"Michigan," Dad said, pointing to the car in front of us.

"Rhode Island," Nathan mumbled about the car that just passed us.

I sighed and rested my head on Sam's shoulder, causing him to toss his arm around me.

"This isn't a state, but there's a Quebec license plate up there," Sam pointed out.

"That counts!" Mom said.

"Counts toward what?" I asked.

Mom just shrugged.

This game went on for a while. I didn't keep track of all the states they were able to find, but it took up a lot of our time.

By the time we finally arrived to the camp ground, we were all anxious to get out of the car. Dad pulled up to the cabin after we had gotten the keys and we immediately went inside.

It was a quaint little cabin with only one main area, two small bedrooms, and a bathroom. It was better than having to sleep in a tent, so I wasn't going to complain about it. The bedroom I had to share with Nathan and Sam had a queen sized bed on one side and a twin over in the corner near the window.

"This isn't so bad," Dad said as he poked his head into the room where Sam, Nathan, and I were putting down our things. "And Mase, you and Sam are *not* to share a bed."

I groaned aloud and gave Dad an annoyed look as he left the room, shutting the door behind him.

"I'll let you two have the bed if you promise not to do anything gross," Nathan offered with a stern look.

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that, these walls are paper thin," Sam replied, sitting down on the bed.

"Just don't do it while I'm in the room," Nathan told him.

I sighed, sitting down beside Sam. "Trust me, you being here would be a mood killer."

We sat in silence for a few moments before Nathan let out a loud groan and heaved himself off his bed. He tapped my shoulder and motioned for Sam and I to follow him.

"Let's go see what's around this place," Nathan suggested in a bored tone.

I shared a look with Sam and he just shrugged, standing up from the bed and holding his hand out for me to take.

Sam and I walked hand in hand behind Nathan. My brother led us through the camp ground past the other cabins and down toward the lake where there were quite a few children splashing around.

We continued walking down the grass toward a group of guys around our age tossing around a football.

Leave it to Nathan to find the one group in this entire camp playing football.

"Nate we're not going over there," I groaned as he set his sights on the group.

"Just one game, Mase," Nathan countered, continuing toward the group.

I glanced up at Sam with a look of annoyance to which he just smiled, signaling he was on Nathan's side with this. I wish I could say life was easier when the two of them didn't get along, but that would be a lie.

Sam and I walked hand in hand to catch up to Nathan, who was already speaking to the group of guys. When Sam and I arrived, a few of the guys glanced down at our hands, but no one commented on it.

"Wanna play some two hand touch?" Nathan asked Sam and we stopped beside him.

"No," I answered for him. "You can't. Your shoulder."

Sam's shoulder was still in the process of healing because there were some complications that set the healing process back. He went to physical therapy every week and it was healing nicely now, but I didn't want him to lose any of the progress he made just because he wanted to play a stupid pick-up football game with random people.

"It's fine," Sam said, waving me off.

I raised my eyebrows at him in a stern look, taking my hand out of his to cross my arms over my chest.

"Uh oh, I got you in trouble," Nathan said, nudging Sam in the arm with his elbow.

Sam ignored him. "I won't throw," he assured me.

"And what if you get tackled?" I asked.

Nathan rolled his eyes. "It's called two hand touch for a reason, Mase."

"You're not helping," Sam told him.

"You three playing?" one of the guys from the group called out from a few feet away, seemingly not noticing our argument.

"Yeah, be there in a sec," Nathan replied before turning back to Sam and me. "Let's go."

"I'm not playing," I said.

"Come on, Mase. It'll be fun," Sam urged me with one of his heart stopping smiles, tugging on my hand.

"All you have to do is catch my passes," Nathan said.

I scoffed. "You say that like it's gonna be easy for me."

Nathan ignored my comment and motioned for Sam and I to follow him. I groaned but followed behind my brother and my boyfriend anyway. The group of guys introduced themselves, but I couldn't be bothered to pay attention. The guys all appeared to be our age except one seemed to be a few years younger. There were five of them which I assumed were all related.

"Should there be a wager?" one of the guys asked with a mischievous smile.

Nathan scoffed, placing his hands on his hips. "Like what?"

"Losers buy dinner?"

"Fine. But one of you needs to come on our team. We're not playing five on three," Nathan told him.

"You can take Jamie or Phillip," the guy offered.

The guys laughed, except for the two named who glared at their relative.

"We'll take the kid," Nathan replied, motioning with his hand for the kid, I didn't know whether it was Jamie or Phillip, to stand beside him.

"You're sure?" the guy said with a laugh. "I think you might be making this easy for us."

Nathan and Sam shared coy looks, chuckling with each other. The sight would have warmed my heart if I wasn't so annoyed.

"I think we'll be fine," Sam spoke up with another chuckle.

"Alright, you guys can have the ball first."

The two teams separated, presumably so we could discuss strategies, but I had no idea. I wasn't a football kind of guy.

"You're Jamie, right?" Nathan asked the kid, leaning down slightly to be closer to eye level.

Jamie nodded, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Alright," Nathan continued. "You and Sam are gonna receive. For the first play stay by me, I'm gonna fake the hand off to you."

Then Nathan turned to Sam. "You fake to left then go deep to the right. It's going to you and I'm throwing long." Sam just nodded.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" I asked him with a scoff.

"If you just waited a second, I was getting to you, impatient brother," Nathan sarcastically remarked. "You snap me the ball then run left." Nathan shoved the football into my hands.

Once we were all sure what we were doing, though I wasn't entirely sure what my purpose was, we lined up. Nathan called the play and I snapped the ball backward to him, Nathan catching it with ease and faking the hand off to Jamie. I took off running left while Sam sprinted ahead of me and then off to the right.

Sam was a lot faster than I gave him credit for. He was down the makeshift field within a few seconds and Nathan quickly whipped the ball toward him. The ball flew through the air and straight into Sam's waiting hands. No one could catch up to him as he brought the ball in a for a touchdown.

The guy from the other team who we were talking to earlier looked to Nathan in shock while my brother held a smug expression on his face.

"That was awesome!" Jamie exclaimed, jumping up and down.

I let out a small chuckle as the rest of the other team seemed astonished by Nathan's throwing ability. Sam jogged back over to us with a wide smile, handing the ball over to one of the kids on the other team.

"Where did you say you were playing in the fall?" one of the guys asked.

Nathan shrugged. "I didn't say."

"Okay, so where?"

"Louisiana State," Nathan replied, the smug look never leaving his face. "Sam will be at UCF."

The kid's face dropped. "You're kidding."

Another guy from his team smacked him in the back of the head. "You got us in a game against two D1 players."

Sam just chuckled and playfully shook his head. "So, are we going to continue?"

He looked so attractive with the orange light from the sun illuminating his skin. His hair was getting long which caused him to constantly run his fingers through it, making it slightly messy with a few strands falling in his face. Just as I was zoning out on my hot boyfriend, he came over to me and smacked my ass.

"Let's go, Mase," he said with a cheeky smile.

"Do you do that with all of your teammates?" I teased as I followed closely behind him.

Sam laughed and turned to face me, walking backwards. "It's a football thing."

His handsome smile pulled me closer to him. There were times when I couldn't control my urges to kiss him for no reason at all. This was one of those times. I quickly caught up to him, placing my hand on the back of his neck and connecting our lips. Sam instantly put his hands on my hips, bringing us closer together.

"Hey!" Nathan yelled at us just as Sam was responding to the kiss.

We pulled apart to look at my brother who was pointing an accusatory finger at us while the others stared with wide eyes.

"You two can make out later. We have a football game to win. Get over here," Nathan demanded.

Sam smirked and gave me a quick peck on the lips before pulling away from me and heading toward where the rest of the group was.

The rest of the game was pretty uneventful for me. All I did was snap the ball to Nathan while Sam and Jamie caught his passes for touchdowns, and ran after the guys who had the ball when we were on defense. All in all, I didn't do much, but we ended up winning and the guys on the other team bought us loads of food from a local restaurant. The guys actually weren't that awful to be around once they got over their awkwardness about Sam and me.

Once we got back to the cabin, it was quite late. My parents were out on the camp ground having a fire with some of the people they had met here, while Nathan, Sam, and I sat around our room.

Sam and I lay together on the bed, Sam with his arm around me while my head was on his chest and our legs were intertwined. Nathan sat in his bed and glared at us.

"What?" I snapped at him, not too harshly.

"You guys are boring," Nathan complained.

Sam laughed lightly. "What do you suggest we do?"

Nathan groaned and threw himself backward on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. "There's nothing to do!"

"I could think of plenty to do, but we can't do it with you here," Sam countered with a coy smile. I scoffed and smacked his chest lightly.

Nathan sent another glare toward us. "You're gross."

"I'm just being honest," Sam replied.

After that encounter, Nathan ignored us and eventually fell asleep. I was on the cusp of falling asleep when Sam lightly shook me.

"Mase," he whispered.

"Hm?"

"Nathan's asleep..."

I looked up at Sam with squinted eyes. "I'm not having sex with you with my brother in the room."

Sam rolled his eyes. "I wasn't going to suggest that."

"Sure..."

"I was gonna say we should go for a swim," Sam said, his tone playful and light.

I sat up, giving him a confused look. "Now?"

Sam just nodded, sending me a hopeful smile. I really couldn't say no to that face and that was how we ended up quietly sneaking out of the cabin with a couple of towels and walking down to the lake.

We placed our towels down on the dock and began taking our clothes off. Sam watched me with a close-lipped smile as I stripped off my shirt.

"You're so hot, Mase," he said, looking me up and down.

I rolled my eyes and tossed my shirt at him. "Shut up."

He chuckled and put my shirt down by my towel before taking his own shirt off and walking over to me.

"You're calling me hot while you're out here looking like *that* ," I said, pointing to his well-defined chest.

Sam smiled and shook his head at me before capturing my lips in a kiss. He placed one hand on my cheek while the other was on my hip, pulling me closer so there was no space between our bodies. I instantly responded to the kiss, my lips moving in sync with his. Just as I tried to quicken the pace, Sam pulled away, the smile still on his face. He leaned down and kissed my shoulder before backing away to take off the rest of his clothes.

Once we were both down to nothing, we jumped into the lake. The water was colder than I expected, my skin instantly filling with goosebumps. Sam and I surfaced at the same time. He shook his head to get his hair out of his face, pushing it back and splashing water in my face in the process.

"Sam," I groaned, using my hands to wipe the water out of my eyes.

Sam giggled and swam over to me, grabbing my waist and pulling me against him. "Sorry."

I smiled at him, kissing the corner of his mouth, then his cheek, and the side of his neck.

"It's cold," I told him with a shiver.

"I know," he replied. "There's no chance of me getting a hard on in here..."

I scoffed, pushing him away from me. "You're gross."

He just laughed, coming after me again.

"Stay away," I said, swimming backward.

"I need you for warmth," Sam responded, grabbing onto me again and kissing my neck as soon as I was close enough.

"If you give me a hickey I'll kill you," I warned him, though my voice was light with a small giggle.

Sam smiled against my skin. "What if I give you two?"

I pushed his face back, Sam laughing and then kissing the palm of my hand.

The two of us swam around for a little while longer before we decided we were too cold. Once we were back inside, I got changed into sweatpants and one of Sam's long sleeve shirts while he was in a similar outfit.

"Is that mine?" he asked as I got into bed beside him, gesturing toward the shirt.

"Yeah, I took it," I told him, pulling on his arm to put it around me as I got situated under the blankets.

"News to me," he said.

Sam turned as around so that we were on our sides while he was behind me, our legs intertwined as he wrapped his arm around me. He kissed the back of my neck before resting his head behind me.

The feeling of being in his arms was euphoric. I felt safe and secure with him so close to me. It was my favorite place and there was nowhere I'd rather be.

"I love you, Sam," I said with a yawn, a smile taking over my face.

Sam pulled me tighter against him.

"I love you too."

And that night, like every other night I spent like this with Sam, I slept with a smile on my face.

**

Knight reached 2 million reads!!! Thank you so much to everyone who has ever read this book! I never imagined getting this many reads on my work so thank you. Here's the second bonus chapter to celebrate.

Also, I meant to say this before I started posting the bonus chapters but I forgot: the bonus chapters WILL NOT BE IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER. There will be a time reference at the beginning of every chapter, so hopefully there won;t be any confusion. For example, this chapter takes place before the Epilogue and the first bonus chapter. The reason I'm doing it like this is because I write these chapters as I get inspiration/ideas about them and my mind is not a perfect thing that gives me ideas in the correct order so these will probably be all over the place.

Anyway, let me know what you think of the chapter!

Bonus | 03

September, Freshman year of college

Jake Johnson

"Are you coming out with us or what, Nate?" I asked with a frustrated groan, looking toward my roommate who sat his ass on the couch.

Getting used to being around Tony and Nate proved to be difficult because one of them was very clearly harder to deal with, though I was sure he felt the same about me. Nate was a complicated guy, I had come to find out. He liked his space and didn't want to be bothered. It was hard to imagine how the guy even had friends, but he was somehow quite popular among the students here.

"I already said no," Nate replied, mindlessly flipping through the channels. "I don't need to be getting in trouble the first week of school. Neither do you."

I rolled my eyes. "Then come with us to make sure we don't do anything stupid."

"I'm not usually one to peer pressure, but you should come, Nathan," Tony added from the doorway. "So we can experience our first college party together."

Nate glanced at Tony before letting out an exaggerated sigh and heaving himself off the couch.

"Where even is this party?" Nate asked, grabbing his keys off the table and making his way toward us.

"At one of the frats a little ways off campus," Tony answered, opening the door for us to follow him through.

"Which one?"

"Kappa Lappa Delta Ligma Pie or something like that," I told him with a shrug. "I don't know Greek."

Tony rolled his eyes. "It's Kappa Sigma."

"Who cares?" I asked as we made our way to the parking lot and into Nate's car. "Frats are dumb anyway. The only good thing about them is the parties."

"Really? I was thinking about rushing one," Tony said from the passenger's seat, giving Nate directions on how to get to the house.

"I wouldn't do it man," I told him, stretching out in the backseat. "I'm pretty sure they give all the newbies butt buddies."

Nate scoffed and glared at me through the rear view mirror. "That's not true."

"I'm pretty sure it is," I said. "The hazing at these things is ridiculous. They might even give you two butt buddies."

I saw Nate roll his eyes in the rearview mirror.

Eventually we got to the party. Nate had to park the car down the street. He said he didn't want it parked near all the drunk idiots and I really couldn't blame him.

Once we were inside, Tony and I found the drinks while Nate followed behind us with a glare on his face as girls rubbed up against him through the crowd.

"Lighten up Nate," I yelled over the music, handing him a water I took from a cooler. "You might even have some fun!"

I was pretty wasted within two hours. I was never one who could hold my liquor, but that didn't matter to me. Getting completely trashed at my first college party was exactly what I set out to do.

Stumbling through the living room and bobbing my head to the loud music, I bumped into someone's back. My head met the dude's shoulder blade, but I barely felt it.

"You okay? the guy asked turning around to face me.

The alcohol must have really gotten to me because I couldn't tear my eyes away from this guy's plump lips. His bottom lip was pouty like it was begging me to take it between my teeth. The alcohol *really* wasn't doing me any favors at that moment. I finally tore my eyes away from his lips to look at the rest of his face.

Shit. He was hot.

Since when did I think guys were hot? Maybe it was the alcohol or maybe it was just this guy. Him and his stupid concerned blue eyes and his sandy blond hair that fell over his forehead.

"Jake?" he asked, waving his hand in front of my face.

"How do you know me?" I questioned with a strange look.

He smiled and I hated how endearing I found it. There was a small gap between his front teeth that somehow made him even hotter to me.

"You're on the football team. Everyone knows you," he said, leaning against the wall to his right.

"You're hot," I blurted out of nowhere. *Shit!*

I wasn't one to get flustered, but this alcohol was *really getting to me* . The guy's eyes widened and I quickly tried to get away from him but he grabbed my wrist, stopping me.

"It's okay," he said, his gentle tone doing nothing to ease my attraction toward him. "I'm Joe," he introduced himself.

"It's okay? I just called you fucking hot. I'm surprised you didn't punch me," I responded, my wrist still being held by Joe's hand. His touch was too

addictive for me to back away.

Joe chuckled. "Yeah, it's okay. You're hot too."

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head at that. Surely, he was just fucking with me. He had to be.

I scoffed, sending him a glare. "Shut up."

Joe just laughed again. "Wanna go somewhere and sober up?"

I didn't know why, but I followed him out of the house when he let go of my wrist and led me out the back door. Joe grabbed two waters as we cut through the kitchen before we went outside. It was still quite warm out and this was the type of heat I wasn't used to.

Joe led me over to an area in the yard under a large tree. The two of us sat down and leaned against the tree silent for a few moments. Joe wordlessly handed me the water and we drank in silence.

I didn't know how long we sat out there not speaking, but it must have been a while because I was finally coming back to my senses. There was no way I was actually attracted to this guy. It was just the alcohol messing with me.

Or so I thought. Because when I finally looked at Joe again, I realized the attraction was still there. Maybe it was even stronger from seeing him under the moonlight.

"You good?" Joe asked, tearing his gaze from the sky to look at me.

"I'm not gay, dude," I told him rather rudely. "So if you think you're getting something, you're going to be disappointed."

Joe laughed and shook his head. "I never said anything like that."

"You didn't have to," I muttered.

"So if you're not gay, why are you still here?" Joe asked, a playful smile on his face.

I glared at him, but didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. All I knew is that I was content sitting on the ground with my arms propping me up as I leaned back, Joe closely sitting by.

"Are you gay?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "But I'm not straight either."

I gave him a look of confusion.

"So you're bi...?" I trailed, sounding unsure.

Joe chuckled. "No."

"What the hell do you mean?" I nearly exclaimed.

"I don't label my sexuality," Joe said with a shrug. "You could say I'm sexually fluid I guess."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

I just stared at Joe for a few more moments before looking away. I wasn't gay, but this guy was making me want to be and I couldn't figure out why.

"You know, you don't have to be one thing," Joe spoke up, bringing my attention back to him.

"What?"

"You don't have to be gay, or straight, or bi," he continued. "You can just be you, whatever that entails. You don't have to think so hard about it."

He was right, I guess. There was nothing stopping me from having my fun with whoever I wanted. And right now, I wanted Joe.

I turned to completely face him and pulled his face to mine with one hand. He smirked into the kiss like he had won some damn prize, but I didn't care.

I wasn't gentle with him as our lips moved together at a quick pace. I bit down on his bottom lip, eliciting a sexy whimper from him, before shoving my tongue into his mouth.

Kissing a guy was something I had never done, but now that I had, I wondered why I had never given it a shot before.

Joe let me have control for a little bit until he grabbed me by the hips and pulled me into his lap. The fact that he could man handle me was turning me on quicker than I would have liked to admit.

As I straddled his lap, I was grinding my hips slowly down on his. We moaned into each other's mouths at the sensation and I felt him hardening beneath me.

Joe pulled away, my lips chasing his for more. He smirked at me, still holding onto my hips.

"We should go inside," he said, his eyes piercing mine intently.

He laughed at my look of confusion.

"Unless you want to continue this in the dirt," he added.

I rolled my eyes and got up from his lap and pulled him up with me, smacking another hard kiss on his lips before dragging him by the arm into the house. No one paid any mind to us as we maneuvered through the crowd and up the stairs. Once we were at the top, Joe went in front of me and led me to an empty bedroom.

"You do this often?" I asked as he opened the bedroom door and led me inside, shutting the door behind us.

He sent me a coy smile. "Wouldn't you like to know."

I shook my head at him, shoving him by the shoulders down onto the bed. I retook my spot on his lap and pulled his face into my hands. This kiss was even more fast paced than our last. Joe didn't let me have complete

dominance, the two of us fighting for the upper hand, and in all honesty, that made it so much hotter.

Joe laid back, pulling me down with him and never breaking the kiss. His hands moved to my hips and began running up my torso and underneath my shirt.

He only had to tug at my shirt slightly for me to get the hint and tear it off before pulling his up and off him as well. Joe didn't have sharply defined muscles, but he was toned and for some reason seeing his lean torso with abs barely poking through only made me more attracted to him.

I brought my mouth back down onto his and my fingers worked on unbuttoning his jeans before I could stop myself. My mouth moved to his neck, earning a moan from Joe, then down his chest and onto his stomach. I picked my mouth up from his skin before pulling his pants off.

Joe smiled down at me before flipping us over so I was underneath him. He gave me similar treatment, kissing me on a sensitive part of my neck and most definitely leaving a bruise there. I couldn't keep the noises of pleasure from leaving my mouth. He kissed down my chest and soon enough, both of us were void of any clothes.

Joe leaned down to pick up his jeans, pulling a condom out of the pocket. When I reached out for the condom, he gave me a strange look and held it so I couldn't reach it.

"I don't bottom," Joe said, staring down at me.

I nearly choked at his words. "Well, *I'm* sure as hell not doing it. Who the hell do you think I am?"

Joe sighed and rolled off me, lying down beside me. I turned my head to look at the side of his face. He stared down at the condom in his hand before sighing again and placing it on the nightstand beside him.

"So I guess we're *not* doing that," Joe said with an easy smile.

I groaned. "Now you turned me on just to do nothing about it."

"You'll live," Joe joked, getting up from the bed to put his clothes on.

I watched him as he dressed, mentally cursing myself for not getting a piece of him. Even now, being almost completely sober, I still thought he was hot.

Joe caught me staring and sent me a coy glance before picking my clothes up and tossing them to me. I really wished he hadn't bent over like that because it was doing nothing to help my situation.

He returned the favor and watched as I got dressed. After I was clothed, I went to open the door, but Joe's hand smacked it shut and his lips were on mine for what felt like a split second before he pulled away with a goofy grin.

"Maybe we'll meet again like this one day, Jake," he said before leaving me alone in the bedroom.

***

"Where did you go off to last night?" Tony asked, handing me a water as I sat on the couch with my head in my hand.

I debated on whether I should tell him the truth about what happened last night. The two of us weren't really all that close, but I didn't really care if he knew. Just as I was about to open my mouth, Nate walked out of his bedroom and into the main area, rummaging through the fridge.

"It's kinda crazy," I told Tony, looking toward him as he sat down on the other side of the couch.

"What's crazy?" Nate asked as he sat down in one of the chairs with a bottle of water in his hand.

"I kinda, may have, almost hooked up with a dude," I admitted.

Nate and Tony looked at me with shocked expressions. Tony's mouth was wide open while Nathan only widened his eyes slightly.

"You're into guys?" Nate asked as Tony was still speechless.

"I guess," I confessed with a shrug. "I didn't know until last night and I thought maybe it was just because I was drunk, but I'm sober now and I still would fuck him."

"So, why didn't you hook up with him?" Tony wondered after his initial shock wore off.

"He wanted *me* to be the bottom," I told them.

"So?" Nate replied.

"Nate, I don't know if you realize what happens durning gay sex, but–"

Nate scoffed. "Yeah, I know what happens, but how do you know you wouldn't like being the bottom if you've never done it?"

There was no way I could ever bottom. I couldn't even think about it without shuddering. I couldn't imagine it *not* being a painful and uncomfortable experience for me.

"I just know," I told him. "Would you ever want to do it?" I snapped at him.

"I'm not gay," Nate replied.

"I'm not either," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

Nate and Tony left me alone on the subject after that. The two of them had left the apartment and I couldn't help thinking of the one person who might actually understand what I was going through at the moment.

That was why a few minutes later, I was lying on my bed with my phone pressed against my ear, calling Sam.

"What's up?" he answered.

"Nothing much, really," I replied with a sigh. "What about you?"

"Busy with football, Mason's taking me to a movie later," Sam said.

I chuckled. "Mason's taking you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I just thought you were the one that took him on dates," I said, switching my phone to my other ear.

"We do things for each other," Sam responded. "And I've been so busy ever since he got here, he wanted to take me on a date."

Things had been weird between Sam and me ever since the picture thing happened. He seemed to be kind of over it, but I knew Mason wasn't and he would side with him no matter what. That was probably why I didn't feel right unloading my problems onto Sam, even though that was exactly what I called him for. He didn't really owe me anything after what I had done.

"Hey," I started.

"Hm?"

"Have I ever told you I'm sorry for the picture thing last year?" I asked and it was dumb because I knew I hadn't apologized.

"I don't know, maybe," Sam said, sounding like he didn't want to talk about this.

"Well, I'm sorry," I said. That was probably the most he was going to get out of me. I wasn't good with apologies, neither was he, but maybe one day I'd get better at it and give him and Mason a proper one. For now, this would have to do.

"It's whatever," Sam started. "It's over now. Mase and I are together and that's what matters."

Sam and I made some small talk for a little while longer before he had to go get ready for his date with Mason.

This brought my thoughts back to Joe. I hadn't even gotten his number or his last name, but he was already fucking me up.

I hoped he was right, and one day we would meet like that again.

**

So what did you think of this chapter? Were you surprised to read Jake's point of view? What did you think about his experience with Joe? And his "apology" to Sam?

Let me know!

Thanks for reading.

Bonus | 04

Freshman year of college, about a week before Christmas

Mason Maloney

It wasn't really part of my plans to be spending the day before my year anniversary with Sam stuck in a car with him and Bella for twenty hours, but that was how it ended up. It was just how the end of the semester landed and I had a final the day before. Bella, on the other hand, was a different story.

She and Pete had gotten into an argument just a few hours before we left school so the two of them refused to ride in the same car. That left Pete and Christo in Ross's car while we had to take Bella. We had planned weeks in advance that it would be best to put three people to a car so we could all switch off driving.

We had already been in the car for almost four hours and I was beginning to get restless.

"Are we stopping soon? I have to pee," Bella said from the backseat.

"There's a rest stop in three miles," Sam replied, glancing at the gps on his phone.

"Perfect."

"I should tell the others we're stopping," I said, picking up my phone from the cup holder. This caused Bella to let out a loud groan.

"I don't want to see *him* ," she exaggeratedly complained.

All I did was roll my eyes in response as I texted *him* to let the others know we would be stopping soon.

"What even happened between you guys?" Sam curiously wondered.

"He's an ass!" Bella exclaimed.

"He's always an ass," I reminded her. "And you've put up with it before."

"This is different," she whined. "He doesn't want me to go to his house on Christmas."

This caused me to turn around in my seat, sporting a shocked expression.

"Really?"

It was no secret that Christmas was Bella's favorite holiday. Her family always went all out on Christmas morning with a huge breakfast hosted at their house. It surprised me that Pete didn't want to spend Christmas with her. The two of them had been dating for a year now. It was pretty much expected that they would spend Christmas together.

"Did you go last year?" Sam asked her.

"No, we were only dating for like two weeks so I didn't suggest it," she responded. "But when I said something about it this year he got all weird and said that he didn't want me to go."

It was hard not to feel bad for her. Sam and I had plans with each other for Christmas Eve *and* Christmas. Not to mention, we spent those days together last year after only officially dating for a few days.

"Did he tell you why?" I asked.

"No! That's why we fought," Bella said, crossing her arms over her chest as Sam took the exit for the rest stop. "And I do *not* want to see him."

As soon as Sam parked the car, Bella jumped out and scurried toward the bathroom. No more than a few seconds later, Ross pulled up next to us, Christo sprawled out in the backseat asleep.

"Where's Bell?" Pete asked when we all stepped out of our cars, Ross opening the back door to lightly shake Christo awake.

"Bathroom," Sam replied, leaning against his car with his arms crossed.

"She doesn't want to see you," I blurted out, earning a kick in the shin from my boyfriend.

"She's being dramatic," Pete responded with an eye roll.

"No, I kinda agree with her on this one," I told him with a glare.

" *Mason* ," Sam hissed.

Pete just scoffed and walked off toward the building.

"He's been moody the whole drive," Ross commented, coming around to the other side of the car with Christo following behind him and rubbing his eyes.

The four of us decided we should all go to the bathroom before we hit the road again. Just as we were about to walk in, Bella came storming out with Pete on her heels.

"Babe, *come on* ," Pete whined in a pleading tone as Bella stomped back over to the car. Sam made sure to unlock it so she could get in.

By the time we were done in the bathrooms and walked back outside, Pete was standing outside Sam's car while Bella sat in the backseat, staring straight ahead with a deep scowl on her face.

"Leave it to the two most stubborn people on the planet to be in a relationship," Ross said with a laugh as we made our way over to the cars.

Pete looked as if he was getting more and more aggravated as the seconds went by.

"We should get back on the road," Ross said when we reached Pete, causing him to turn toward us.

Pete just sighed and got back into Ross's car, slamming the door behind him.

"Have fun with him," I said before getting back to my own seat.

We were back on the road within a few minutes, Bella silently fuming in the backseat with her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"Did he say anything?" I asked her, turning around in my seat.

"No," she spat. "He won't even apologize or explain anything. He just wants me to forgive him."

Even I knew getting Pete to apologize was an uphill battle. He thought she was overreacting, so there was no way he actually felt bad about it. He just didn't want her to be mad at him.

A few moments later, my phone started ringing, Jonah's name showing up on the screen.

"It's your brother," I told Sam just before answering the phone, "Hello?"

"Hey is Sam still driving?" Jonah asked.

"Yeah, he's gonna drive for a few more hours then we're gonna switch," I told him.

"Alright," Jonah replied. "Is everything going okay? Where are you guys?"

"Everything's fine," I said.

I saw Sam shaking his head out of the corner of my eye.

"I think we're still in Georgia. We might be in South Carolina," I continued.

"Okay. Tell Sam to be careful and call me when you stop for the night," Jonah said.

"I will," I assured him. We said our goodbyes before hanging up.

"What did he want?" Sam asked in a slightly irritated tone.

I rolled my eyes. "Be nice. He was just checking up on us. He wants you to call when we stop for the night."

Later on, I fell asleep in the passenger's seat and woke up a while after in the middle of a conversation between Sam and Bella.

"I mean– I don't think we're doing anything Christmas night if you want to come over," I heard Sam say.

"I don't want to butt in on your couple time," Bella replied.

"It's Christmas, it's not couple time."

"Where are we?" I asked in a groggy tone, rubbing my eyes.

"Almost in North Carolina. We're going to stop soon to switch," Sam told me.

"I booked a hotel for us off the highway in Virginia," Bella spoke up.

"Okay," I said with a yawn. "For the others too?"

"Unfortunately."

A little while later, we stopped so that Sam could get in the backseat and stretch out while I got in the driver's seat and Bella sat next to me. We narrowly avoided having to see the others while we switched, which Bella was happy about.

While Sam napped in the backseat, Bella and I talked about everything under the sun, other than her boyfriend. I could tell she was upset, but if she wasn't going to bring it up I definitely wouldn't.

A few hours passed and it was dark out. We pulled into the parking lot of the hotel Bella booked and got out of the car. I opened the door to the backseat and leaned over Sam.

"Wake up," I commanded lightly.

Sam incoherently muttered something, blinking his sleepy eyes open.

"We're stopping for the night. Call your brother," I said, kissing his cheek and then leaving him to follow Bella into the hotel.

By the time I met her in there, she had already checked us in and handed me one of the room keys.

"I need to wait for the others because I booked the room," she told me.

"I'll wait with you," I replied and just after the words left my mouth, the other three walked into the hotel.

"Ross come with me to check in," Bella said, causing Ross to go up to the desk with her.

"Man, I am so done with all this driving," Christo complained, tossing his arm around my shoulder and using me to hold himself up.

Pete was quiet, obviously irritated over his fight with Bella.

A few moments later, Sam made his way inside and instantly came over to where we stood, pushing Christo off of me.

" *Sam,* " he whined.

"You know I hate that," Sam argued.

"You hate me hanging out with your boyfriend?"

"I hate you hanging *on* my boyfriend."

I rolled my eyes as Sam put his arm around me.

"Oh my gosh!" Christo exclaimed, pointing at something behind us. "There's Christmas karaoke at the hotel restaurant tonight!"

I turned around to see the sign Christo was referring to. Hopefully, we wouldn't end up going there.

Luck was not on my side because after getting checked in and putting our things in our rooms, Christo dragged us all down to the hotel restaurant where some guy was loudly and badly doing a rendition of "All I Want for Christmas is You."

The seating in the restaurant was very informal. We sat ourselves and it was like we were sitting among everyone else who was here mingling and socializing.

"Someone do a duet with me," Christo begged as we waited for our food. "Ross?"

All eyes turned to Ross and I gave him a coy smile. His eyes widened as he sipped on his water.

"I can't," Ross said slowly.

"Why?"

"I'm Jewish," he replied.

I couldn't help but laugh.

Christo gave him a confused stare. "No you're not."

I couldn't listen to the rest of the conversation because someone pulled up a chair and sat down directly beside me, pulling my attention to them. He was a guy, probably two or three years older than me, with his lips quirked in a flirtatious smile and wearing a hideous Christmas sweater.

"I'm Evan," he told me, leaning closer.

"Mason," I awkwardly replied.

"Cute name," he said with a small laugh. "Almost as cute as you."

I almost gagged at his words and looked to Sam for help to see that he wasn't even paying attention, rather fighting with Christo about doing a duet. *Stupid asshole. Can't even protect me from weird creeps.*

" You look young. You aren't jail bait, are you?" Evan asked, putting his hand on my shoulder.

I cleared my throat, trying to get Sam's attention. "I'm eighteen."

His smile grew wider. "Do you want to get out of here?"

" *Excuse me* ?" Sam interjected, his face stern.

"Just asking your friend here if he wants to hang out," Evan replied with a smirk.

Sam let out a humorless laugh. "My friend?"

"Mason," he said, gesturing toward me.

Sam's eyes darkened as he glared at Evan, leaning over me to get closer.

"You mean my boyfriend?"

Evan's eyes widened and he appeared speechless for a moment. "Your–"

"Yes, *my boyfriend* ," Sam spat. "So get lost before I make you."

Evan was up and away from me faster than I could even blink.

I turned to look at Sam with a smirk on my face while he glared at Evan's retreating figure.

"That was hot," I told him, leaning over to kiss his jaw.

Sam smirked down at me. "I guess I should get jealous more often."

I chuckled as he gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

The rest of the night was uneventful except for Christo doing an awful rendition of "Jingle Bell Rock."

The next day we finally made it home and I was ready to sleep in my own bed for a month straight.

***

Christmas Eve

"Guys wait!" Mae exclaimed as we rushed around, trying to get out of the house so we could leave to visit Sam's mom. We were already running late.

"Mae, we really need to get going," Jonah said in a slightly panicked tone.

Sam was busy trying to get Lila to put on her coat. She had gotten even more mischievous since the last time I saw her, running away from her uncle as he chased her around the house with her coat.

"I know, but we need to wear the matching Christmas sweaters I got!" Mae told him. She was already wearing hers, as was Lila, but earlier on Jonah had made it clear he was *not* putting the sweater on.

"Mae–"

"We're not leaving here until we *all* have the sweaters on," Mae said sternly, looking up at her husband with her hands on her hips. I could tell by the look on her face, she was going to get her way.

Jonah grumbled and walked away and up the stairs, presumably up to their bedroom to change into the sweater. He came down a few moments later, looking miserable in the ugly sweater with Miles following behind him with a matching look.

"Here," Jonah said, throwing my sweater at me, hitting me in the face with it.

I sighed, but threw the thing on over my t-shirt anyway. I didn't want to have to face Mae's wrath.

"I'm not wearing that," Sam said as he zipped up Lila's coat.

"But Uncle Sammy!" Lila complained. "You can match me and Masey!"

"Put the damn sweater on, Sam. We're already running late," Jonah demanded, taking Lila's hand to bring her out to the car.

Sam begrudgingly put the sweater on and came over to me with a sigh.

"Do I look as ridiculous as I feel?" he asked.

"Only a little," I teased. He shoved my shoulder before grabbing onto my hand and leading me out to the car.

The hour long car ride felt eternal as we listened to Mae and Lila sing along loudly to all the Christmas songs on the radio. Lila was a cutie but that girl could not sing.

When we finally made it to the prison, we did all the check-in protocol and then we were led to the large gymnasium where they were holding the Christmas Eve festivities. It didn't take long for Melissa to find us.

"I'm so glad you're all here!" she exclaimed, giving all of us brief hugs. "Come on, I have a table for us."

At the table, there were some coloring pages and crayons set up and also some snacks. Lila instantly began coloring a picture of a Christmas tree.

"So how was your first semester?" Melissa asked Sam and me.

"Pretty good," I answered. "Glad to have a break though."

"Sam told me you two are living together?"

"Yeah, we're in an apartment on campus," I told her.

"And he isn't driving you crazy?" Melissa joked.

"Mom," Sam said.

I laughed. "Sometimes."

"I love the matching sweaters," Melissa commented.

"It was all me," Mae told her. "These humbugs didn't even want to wear them."

"I wanted to wear mine," Lila pointed out. Melissa lovingly smiled down at her.

"Apparently these sweaters were worth making us late," Jonah muttered.

"Don't be a Scrooge, Jonah," Melissa warned her son.

"Grammy what's a Scrooge?" Lila asked, stopping her coloring.

I didn't listen as Melissa explained to her.

"No one else is wearing Christmas sweaters," Sam mumbled, causing me to look around the room.

"It's *fine* ," I assured him.

"It wouldn't be so bad if we weren't all matching," he complained.

"It made Mae, Lila, and your mom happy," I reminded him.

"I guess."

"I put some extra money in the commissary for you, Ma," Jonah told her. "Figured I couldn't really bring you much else for Christmas."

"Thanks honey. You didn't have to do that though. You guys being here is enough," she replied kindly.

Later on there was some game in the middle of the gym that Lila dragged Melissa out on the floor for. It was some version of freeze dance with Christmas songs, but there were some extra rules that I didn't follow.

By the time we had to leave, it was already dark out. After a teary goodbye from Melissa, we left the prison and started our trek home.

"Do you think Santa already went to our house?" Lila asked me, tapping on my leg.

"Probably not. You have to be asleep for that," I told her.

"It would be easier for him if he came when we weren't there," she pointed out.

This girl was too smart for her own good.

"You're right but those aren't the rules," I replied.

"The rules are weird," she said.

"I know."

It didn't take long for her to fall asleep. When Jonah pulled up outside my house, I bid the family goodbye and Sam followed me out of the car to walk me up to the door.

"See you bright and early tomorrow morning," Sam said, leaning in to give me a kiss.

"I love you," I told him.

"I love you too."

***

Christmas Day

I woke up to both Sam and Nathan standing over me.

"Get up," Nathan said with a shove. I shoved him back as I sat up.

"When did you get here?" I asked Sam in a groggy voice.

"A few minutes ago," he answered, sitting on the side of my bed. "I thought you'd be up."

"He should be," Nathan commented.

"Shut up," I told him. "And get out so I can change."

Nathan rolled his eyes. "Hurry up. And don't do anything dirty on the Lord's birthday."

"Get out."

With that, Nathan left the room, shutting the door tightly behind him.

Sam got up from my bed and started going through my shirts hanging in my closet.

"Do you have anything Christmassy?" he asked, pulling out one of my shirts before deciding to put it back.

"I don't know," I replied, rubbing my eyes.

"Here," he said, pulling out a red and black checkered button down. "This is good enough."

"Thanks sweetie pie."

"Don't call me that," Sam grumbled.

"Okay. Thanks honey," I joked, pulling my shirt off to replace it with the one he picked.

Sam rolled his eyes. "Stop, *babe* ."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Low blow."

He knew how much I hated that pet name.

"You started it," Sam replied, moving to my dresser and opening up my pants drawer. He pulled out a pair of dark jeans and tossed them over to me.

"You have to hurry up. Your family is going to be here soon," he told me with a pointed look.

I quickly got dressed and finished getting ready before heading downstairs with Sam following me.

"Thank God Sam is here to get you up and moving," Mom joked, giving me a kiss on the cheek. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas Mom."

"Hurry up!" I heard Dad yell from the living room. "We have to do presents before people start showing up!"

I rolled my eyes as Nathan came out of the kitchen with two coffees in his hand, giving one of them to me, before we all made our way into the living room.

"Mase, catch!" Dad said, tossing a present at me.

Sam got in front of me and caught the box before it could hit me and spill my coffee.

"Nice grab, Sam," Dad complimented to which Sam just chuckled and handed me the gift.

We sat down on the couch and I placed my coffee down and began opening my gift just as Dad tossed another to Sam and then one to Nathan.

"I know we said we weren't doing anniversary gifts since we're both broke," I said as I handed Sam his gift from me. "But mine is an anniversary and Christmas gift."

"It better not be expensive," Sam replied, shaking the box. "Because mine will look so stupid if it is."

"It's not," I assured him.

Sam opened the present and opened the box to find the small silver pendant with our anniversary date on it. I figured he could add it to the chain he always wears.

"Aw, Mase," he said with a wide grin. "I love it. Mine really is going to look dumb now."

"No it won't," I said with a laugh.

"Don't laugh," he warned, handing me the box with my present in it.

I just laughed at him and started to open it as he took his chain off to add the pendant. I opened the box to find a slightly lopsided mug with our anniversary date etched in the side.

"I made it in my stupid ceramics class this semester," Sam mumbled.

"I love it," I told him truthfully.

"You don't have to lie. I know it's ugly," he joked.

I chuckled. "It has character. Thank you."

I leaned over to give him a soft kiss on the lips.

"Enough smooching! We have to finish getting ready for our company!" Dad exclaimed, causing us to pull apart.

Sam and I shared a look before getting up and heading to the kitchen to help my mom.

***

"What is *he* doing here?" was the first thing Bella said when she walked into my house on Christmas night.

"We thought we could do a double date Christmas dinner!" I told her with a wide smile on my face. Bella fumed from where she stood in the doorway, looking toward Pete then me.

"I told him this was a bad idea," Sam defended.

"At least one of you has some sense," Bella replied, not moving from her place.

"Come sit, Bell," I urged. "Please."

Pete watched her as she made her way over to the table, setting down the dish of cookies she brought.

The food was already out on the table so we ate in silence for a few moments before Pete tried to break the silence.

"So... how was your Christmas?" he asked. Sam and I both groaned at his stupidity.

"Seriously?" Bella spat, clenching her fist over the fork in her hand.

"Yes?"

"It would have been great if I got to spend it with my boyfriend," she said in a snarky tone.

Sam and I looked at each other with awkward expressions. I knew this would happen when I decided to invite them both over, but I wasn't prepared for the awkwardness that would come with it.

"Bella–" Pete sighed.

"But he didn't want to spend it with me," she cut him off.

"Yes I did," Pete argued.

"Obviously not," she said. "You–"

"My parents are getting divorced," he stopped her and everyone's eyes went wide. "That's why I didn't want you coming over because they haven't told the rest of our family so they were acting like they're still together and it was awkward as hell."

"Why didn't you just tell me?" Bella asked in a soft tone.

"I was embarrassed," Pete admitted.

"You don't need to be embarrassed about that stuff with me. I love you and I'll endure any awkwardness with your family with you because that's what couples do," she told him.

"I know," he replied.

I motioned for Sam to follow me out of the room so the two of them could talk.

"At least they're working it out," Sam said as the two of us sat down on the couch in the living room.

Sam tossed his arm around me and a leaned into his side, lying down so I could place my head on his chest.

"I knew they just needed to be forced to talk," I told him. "They're both too stubborn to do it themselves."

Sam hummed in agreement, turning the TV on to play a random Christmas movie.

"Should we leave them and go drive around to see the Christmas lights before people start taking them down?" Sam suggested a few moments later.

I smiled and nodded. "Great idea."

And with that, we were off to see the lights for the last time for the Christmas season.

**

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays everyone!

This chapter took me weeks to write because I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do with it but I wanted to get it up before Christmas, so I quickly finished it in bed and it is now four minutes before Christmas so I met my goal lmao.

Let me know what you think!

Bonus | 05

Mason and Sam 25 years old, the day before Valentine's Day

Mason Maloney

My eyes began to burn from staring at my computer for so long. I rubbed my eyes for a few moments before going back to the essay I was grading. This was what my life had turned into after becoming a high school English teacher. Grading, grading, and more grading.

I glanced at the time to realize it was already past ten, meaning I definitely wasn't going to get through the rest of the essays tonight and would have to finish tomorrow. On Valentine's day.

Sam was already fast asleep considering he gets up by six every morning to go work out even though he's going to end up going later in the day as well. Since football season was over, he tended to get bored very easily. I would always find him fixing things around the house that didn't need to be fixed or annoying the shit out of me by rearranging our things. But his paycheck for being the quarterback for the Giants was quite hefty, so I wasn't going to complain much.

"Why are you still up?" Sam asked in a raspy voice, sounding as if he had just woken up. I turned to see that he was standing behind the couch, looking down at me and rubbing his sleepy eyes.

"Trying to get through the last of these," I answered, turning back to my laptop.

"It's late," he said, coming around to sit beside me on the couch.

I rolled my eyes. "It's not that late."

"It is when you have to be to work by seven-thirty," Sam pointed out with a knowing look.

I groaned, throwing my head back and shutting the laptop. "I hate grading. I should just stop assigning things."

Sam chuckled. "I'm sure your students wouldn't mind that but you might get fired."

"Then I could just be a gold digger and you could be my sugar daddy," I told him with a playful grin.

"That would be okay with me," Sam said, returning my grin.

I gave him a quick peck on the lips before leaning my head on his shoulder and letting out a sigh.

"I really have to start enforcing stricter page limits on my students. I say at least five pages and some of them hand in fifteen," I said, causing Sam to laugh.

"Couldn't be me in high school. I was doing bare minimum," Sam replied.

"Yeah, I don't know what's wrong with them," I muttered, sliding the laptop off my lap and placing it on the table.

Sam stood up from the couch, rubbing his eyes once again before holding his hand out for me to take. I let him pull me off the couch and into his side, kissing the side of my head.

"Let's go to sleep," Sam suggested, shutting the living room light off and leading me to our bedroom.

After doing my nightly routine, I climbed in bed next to Sam and tucked myself under his arm while he scrolled through his phone.

"Did you see Nathan's instagram post?" Sam asked, tilting his phone toward me so I could see.

The picture on the screen was Nathan with his arm around a pretty brunette while she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Who is that?" I asked, tapping the picture to see if he tagged her. Of course, he didn't.

"I think she's a model," he replied. "There's probably going to be an article about them by tomorrow."

"Why wouldn't that asshole tell me he got a girlfriend?" I asked in an annoyed tone. "I talked to him like two days ago."

"I talked to him today and he didn't say anything about it," Sam said. "Maybe he wanted to wait until he saw us?"

Nathan played for the Philadelphia Eagles so he was only about two hours away. Luckily we were able to see him often. He had moved back home for the offseason which was just over three hours away from us. We couldn't go back until the summer since I worked at the school.

"Then why would he post it on instagram?"

"True."

I sighed. "I'll give him an earful about it later."

Sam laughed and put his phone down on his nightstand and soon enough the two of us were asleep.

***

"Mr. Maloney do you have any plans for Valentine's day?" one of my students, Abigail, asked during homeroom.

I didn't have a chance to see Sam this morning before I had to leave for work. He had already left the house for his first workout of the day. So I had gotten to school without having said "Happy Valentine's Day" to my boyfriend.

"Yeah, uh," I stuttered, looking away from my computer to face her. "I'm going to cook my boyfriend some dinner and, uh, ask him to marry me."

I thought back to the ring I had hidden in my sock drawer. I spent every day hoping Sam wouldn't find it.

"You're going to propose?" Abigail exclaimed, slamming her hands down on her desk and gaining the attention of the whole class.

"OMG. Mr. Maloney!" another student, Kelly, squealed. "How are you going to do it?"

"Just ask?"

The girls gave me unamused looks.

"No," Abigail said with a deadpanned look.

"What do you mean no?" I asked with an incredulous expression.

"You have to, like, hide the ring in the food or something," Kelly said to which Abigail nodded in agreement.

"That'll make make it dirty," I said, shaking my head. "Or he'll eat it." Sam tended to inhale his food so I would be too nervous to do that.

"You have to do something special!" Abigail whined.

"I am. I'm asking on Valentine's Day," I told her with a grin.

Sam and I weren't a very romantic couple and that was fine with me.

"You have to tell us how it goes on Monday," Kelly said, just as the bell ending homeroom sounded. "Please, please, please."

"I will tell you," I confirmed. "I promise."

The two girls squealed before they left the room. I only had about a minute until people from my first class came rushing into my room.

"Mr. M!" one of my students, Bryan, exclaimed as he scurried over to my desk.

"What's wrong?"

"Did you grade my essay yet?" he asked with wide eyes.

I groaned. "I didn't get to it yet."

He let out a loud groan. "If I don't get at least a seventy-five I won't be able to play basketball."

"I know. You tell me this every day."

"So I need to know!"

"I'm sure you did fine," I assured him. "You know, when you actually *do* your assignments, it's good work."

"I know but I *hate* doing it," Bryan complained.

"I know. And I hate grading it," I said. "But I still do it."

"Because you're better than me."

"No."

"Mr. Maloney!" another student, Leon, said as he came up to my desk to stand beside Bryan. "Did you bring chocolate?"

I nodded, grabbing the bag of candy out of my bag and handing it to him.

"Let everyone have some, Leon," I said in a warning tone.

"I will, I will," he said. "What do you do for Valentines if you're single?"

"Nothing."

"Leon, go away. We are talking about my grade," Bryan said in an annoyed tone.

"Both of you go sit," I said.

I really liked my students, but if I let them get their way, we would just spend the whole class period talking.

"I heard you're getting engaged tonight," another student, Sophie, said in an excited tone.

"It traveled that fast?"

That was all it took for the whole class to start excited chatter about my plans for the evening.

"Okay, quiet down," I said, standing up from my desk and heading toward the board.

"You can't just drop that news and expect us to be able to focus," Sophie said with raised eyebrows.

" *You* dropped the news," I pointed out. "Plus, he has to say yes for me to get engaged."

"He's gonna say yes!"

"Open your books," I said, beginning class.

"This book is wack, Mr. M," Bryan said as he opened to the page. "I'd rather hear about you getting engaged to Sam Knight."

"Oh my God," I muttered.

"Did I tell you he was my QB for fantasy football?" Bryan asked.

"You told me every week. We're starting class now."

"I had Nathan Maloney," Leon added.

"Guys," I said in a stern tone. "Focus."

"This book is so romantic," Sophie stated with a smile. "Everything he does is for Daisy."

Bryan scoffed. "He's an obsessive weirdo."

Those two were always the most vocal in my class and they rarely ever agreed on anything. I couldn't tell if they hated each other or just loved to argue.

Sophie glared at him. "Well maybe *she* thinks he's romantic."

Bryan just rolled his eyes. "She just likes the attention."

Sophie looked as if she was going to start yelling so I quickly put a stop to their debate.

"Sophie's right. Gatsby is romantic," I interjected. Sophie gave Bryan a boastful look while he looked at me like I was crazy. "He's a romantic because he romanticizes his life. He sees everything as how he *wishes* it is and not how it actually is."

"So he's delusional," Bryan said.

I nodded. "And you're right. He's obsessive. He's obsessed with the romanticized version of his life. Obsessed with who he thinks Daisy is, the version of her he has in his head."

"Is Nick in love with Gatsby? Because that's what I'm getting from this," Leon called out in a slightly confused tone.

"A lot of people read it that way," I confirmed.

"But do you think he is?"

"I think there is definitely queer subtext. It might make more sense for people to read it that way. Sure."

It was this type of class that made me love being a teacher. The students were engaged and genuinely interested in what we were doing. I always did my best to make my class interesting and when it worked out, it made it better for everyone.

After a long discussion about *Gatsby,* the bell rang to end class and my students packed up their things to leave the room.

"Good luck tonight, Mr. M," Bryan said with a smile. "Let us know how it goes."

I smiled back. "Will do."

***

I was anxious to get home after getting a text from Sam.

Wish I got to see you this morning. Can't wait for you to get home. I LOVE YOU

I didn't want him to ruin my plans for tonight by doing something extravagant for me. I had to get there to stop him before he got too far along.

After stopping at the store to pick up flowers and the other things I needed for my plan, I made my way home. The house was quiet when I got there, making me suspicious.

I quietly tiptoed through the house to get to the bedroom and put down my things in my closet. It was then that I noticed the smell of food. My eyes widened and I rushed out of the room and into the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" I asked in a slightly panicked tone when I saw Sam cooking in the kitchen.

"Well hello there, love of my life," Sam said with a wide grin.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making you a Valentines dinner," Sam replied as if he was stating the obvious.

"I wanted to do that for you," I said, a slight whine in my tone.

"You always cook for me," Sam said, raising an eyebrow. "Let me do this for you."

I couldn't stay annoyed at him as a smile crept onto my face.

"Okay," I said, going over to him to give him a peck on the lips.

"How was work?"

"Good," I said with a content sigh. "Don't come into the bedroom."

I didn't give him a chance to reply as I left the kitchen and went back to the bedroom to set up the rest of my plan. I pulled the bags out from the closet and started spreading the rose petals I bought around on the bed.

Once it looked how I wanted it to, I set up the candles around the room and put some in the bathroom connected to our bedroom. A while later, there was a knock on the bedroom door.

"Dinner is done. Are you all set?" Sam asked through the door.

"Don't come in here!" I said, rushing toward the door.

"Come to the dining room."

I waited a few moments for him to walk away before I left the room with his flowers in my hand and the ring in my pocket and headed into the dining room.

Sam was standing at the head of the table with a bouquet of roses in his hand. He had the table set up with the food and a bottle of wine and the lights in the dining room were dimmed and a candle was lit in the center of the table.

"Are those for me?" he teased, gesturing toward the flowers in my hand.

"No, they're for my other boyfriend," I said with an eye roll, going toward him to take the roses out of his hand.

"He's a lucky guy," Sam replied, picking up the vase he already had ready for the bouquet.

I let out a snort of a laugh and stuck the flowers in the vase and gave Sam a long kiss. He smiled into the kiss before pulling away and then pulled out the chair for me to sit.

Sam poured me a glass of wine as I filled my plate with the pasta he made for dinner.

"This is really good," I said as I took a bite of the food. Sam was good at making his own sauce and it was one of the only things he could make but I loved it.

"Good," he said, taking a sip of wine.

"You know, I was going to make you salmon," I told him with a grin, knowing how much he loved it.

"You can still make it for me tomorrow," he said, returning my grin.

I laughed, smiling as I brought my glass to my lips. "I guess I could do that for you."

When we finished dinner, Sam cleared off the table and brought out a chocolate cake he baked.

"You spoil me," I said as he cut me a slice.

"It's what I live to do," he replied, kissing the top of my head.

After cutting himself a slice, he sat back down and all of a sudden a wave of nerves hit me. I placed my fork down on the table and took a deep breath.

"Are you alright?" Sam asked with a look of concern, placing the back of his hand on my forehead to check my temperature.

"I'm okay."

The ring in my pocket seemed to weigh a ton as I thought about what I wanted to do next.

"You seriously look pale," he said.

I took a deep breath and stood from my seat, Sam giving me a look of confusion. I grabbed his hand in mine and got down on one knee, Sam's eyes widening.

"What are you doing?" he rushed out. "Get up! Get up!"

"Sam–"

"No! You aren't seriously going to ask me to marry you right now?"

I scowled at him. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Sam sighed and got out of his chair, getting down on one knee in front of me and releasing my hand to pull a small box out of his pocket. This made me understand his reaction from before. We really had planned a proposal on the same night.

"You're ruining my plan," he said, gesturing toward the box.

I pulled the ring box I had out of my pocket. "You're ruining mine."

We shared slightly annoyed looks with each other for a few moments before we both burst out into laughter.

"I guess we don't even have to ask the question," I said, opening up the ring box.

"I guess not," Sam agreed, opening his up.

Surprisingly, the rings complemented each other nicely. They weren't the exact same ring, but they looked like they went together.

Sam smiled and took my left hand, slipping the ring on my finger before I did the same for him. We stood up and I immediately tossed my arms

around his neck and brought him in for a kiss.

"I can't wait to marry you," Sam said in a breathless tone against my lips.

All I could do was stare at him with a loving look and kiss the corner of his mouth before pulling away to stare down at my ring.

"I love it," I told him.

"I love mine too."

"Nathan helped me pick it," I admitted.

"He did?" Sam asked, looking confused. "He helped me pick yours."

"That asshole," I muttered, grabbing my phone out of my pocket and Facetiming my brother.

Nathan's face popped up on the screen within a few moments.

"I'm kinda busy right now, Mase," he answered the call.

I held my hand up, showing him my ring.

"I'm engaged," I said.

"I know," he replied.

I panned the camera over to Sam and showed him his ring.

"Sam is engaged," I said.

Nathan laughed and I turned the camera back toward my face.

"You knew we were planning to propose at the same time!" I exclaimed.

"I did," Nathan said with a laugh.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked.

"And ruin the surprise?" he wondered with a playful smile. "I thought it would be funny. You're lucky I made sure the rings would look nice together."

"He has a point," Sam interjected. "He couldn't say anything about it because then he would ruin it."

"Thank you, Sam," Nathan said.

"I guess," I sighed.

"Anyway, I know you don't want to spend your Valentine's day talking to me especially after you just got engaged," Nathan said.

"You're right."

Nathan rolled his eyes. "Okay. Congratulations to both of you. Can't wait to be best man at your wedding."

"Wait, wait," I stopped him. "Who was that girl on your instagram?"

"Okay, bye Mase! Bye Sam! Love you guys!" Nathan hung up.

"He's unbelievable," I said with a scoff, shaking my head and placing my phone down on the table.

"Maybe it's just not serious yet," Sam suggested with a shrug, moving closer to me and running his hands on my shoulders.

I nodded in agreement. "Come on."

I grabbed onto his hand and pulled him with me to the bedroom. His grin was wide when he saw how I had decorated the room.

"Very romantic," he said, kissing my cheek.

"Come *on* ," I urged, pulling him into the bathroom where I had placed a plate of chocolate strawberries and candles around the tub.

I turned the tub on and poured the bubble bath inside before turning back to Sam.

"You went all out," Sam said with a slight laugh.

"Well, you ruined the rest of my plans so..."

Sam rolled his eyes, lightly shoving my shoulder before starting to unbutton my shirt. Once he was done, he pushed it off of my arms and let it fall to the floor. I gave him the same treatment and as soon as we were undressed, we left our rings on the counter and got into the tub.

"Want a strawberry?" I asked, picking one up from the plate behind me.

Sam hummed and nodded. I held it out to him and he took a bite out of the strawberry.

"Did you get those from that place?" he asked.

"The place that you like, yeah."

"Mm, they're so good," he said with a smile, leaning over to kiss my lips.

We spent a while in the tub before getting out. Sam wrapped a soft towel around my body and we made our way into the bedroom.

"Wanna try out the bed?" Sam asked in a teasing tone.

I laughed and lightly pushed him. "You're gross."

"You love me."

"I do."

**

I know it's two days late, but Happy Valentine's day!

I didn't get the idea for this until the day before Valentine's so I worked on it for a couple days. Better late than never!

Let me know what you think!